Architecture and the Tangible Past: 
The Built Environment of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha

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In 1982, somewhat exhaused from years of work on a book and museum show on the modernist architect Richard Neutra, I began to think about what I might do “just for fun” as a respite from my steady trade of architectural history. The diversion I wound up choosing was a systematic, though casual, re-reading of all of the work of William Faulkner, whom I had known as I was growing up in Oxford, Mississippi. I had read him then—because he was “there”—with great pleasure but with less than total comprehension. Now, in middle age, I would treat myself to a richer and more resonant reading of the work. But, as I began to read, I soon realized that as a son of the Carolinian work ethic, I could never do anything that vast just “for fun.” Almost fortuitously at first and then unabashedly, I found myself underlining the architecture passages. I was amazed at the extent Faulkner’s treatment of architecture, and I began to have hazy, academic thoughts of getting “a nice little article” out of it to assuage my guilt for having so much fun. The result was a lecture at the annual Faulkner conference in Oxford and this essay on Faulkner’s literary architecture. I dedicate this effort to my sunny California children, Tracy and Taylor, in the hope that it will help to remind them that they are also children of Yoknapatawpha.

Photographs by Thomas Hines except where noted

I Yoknapatawpha, from The Portable Faulkner (Viking, 1946).

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In William Faulkner’s second novel, *Mosquitos*, a charac-
ter “learned nearer to see the paper. It was a single sheet of
a Sunday magazine section: a depressing looking article in
small print about Romanesque architecture... Are
you interested in architecture? she asked instantly, ...
So many people waste their
time over things like archi-
tecture and such. It’s much
to better to be a part of life,
don’t you think... than
to make your life barren through dedicating it to an
improbable and ungrateful
poverty. Don’t you think so?” “I hadn’t thought about
it,” Pete said cautiously.”

But it is obvious that
Faulkner had thought about
it and that he believed that
the art of architecture—like
the art of literature—was
indeed a “part of life” and
*did* contribute to the culture
and civilization of a not
“ungrateful poverty.”

Architecture was important
to Faulkner personally. He
had a keen eye and sense for
the form, structure, and
meaning of buildings in his
surroundings. And he used
those elements of his Missis-
sippi environment as the
models for the architecture of
his invented world: the town
called “Jefferson” and the
county of “Yoknapatawpha.”

Much has been said and
written on the place of
nature in Faulkner’s work—
the woods, the bear, the
natural landscape—but
relatively little has been done
on Faulkner’s almost equally
great interest in the built
environment—the opposite of nature—as metaphor and symbol of larger themes, attitudes, and moods. Three of his novels have architectural titles: Sanctuary, Pylon, and The Mansion. The Hamlet and The Towns have architectural implications; and the first, discarded title of both Light in August and Absalom, Absalom was Part House. Numerous short stories have architectural titles or themes, and architects appear as characters throughout the stories and novels.

Faulkner's fellow Mississippian, Eudora Welty, observed that “place has a more lasting identity than we have. . . . fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the cross-roads of circumstance.” And of all the masters in the history of literature, Faulkner was one of the greatest in his ability to see, to evoke, to explain, to use the details—as well as the essence—of the physical environment. In these gifts, he was equaled only by Flaubert, Hardy, Joyce, and Henry James. “It sometimes seems to me,” wrote Malcolm Cowley of Yoknapatawpha in his introduction to The Portable Faulkner, “that every house or novel has been described in one of Faulkner’s novels.”

Architectural historians have done reasonable justice to the certified “monuments” and to the great urban centers, but they have had more trouble getting at the smaller, more rural, more parochial places. Perhaps Faulkner and other writers of fiction can, through their special kind of imaginative probing, help us to locate and explain the sense and meaning, the smell and ambience of the more elusive architecture of the “Jeffersons” of the world.

Faulkner was born in 1897 in New Albany, Mississippi. His family then moved back to Ripley, the ancestral hometown, before they moved permanently to Oxford in the early twentieth century. Although Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha are repositories of several north Mississippi towns and counties, Ripley and Oxford are the dominant prototypes. William went to school in Oxford, attended Ole Miss sporadically, and then ventured out, first to Canada during World War I, then to
New Orleans in the early 1920s, and then in 1925 to Europe, where he had the traditional Wanderjahrt. Upon returning to America, Faulkner lived a while longer in New Orleans, where he was especially influenced by the older writer Sherwood Anderson, then living in the French Quarter. In the novel Mosquitoes, "outside the window, New Orleans, the veiled cortèges, brooding in a faintly tarnished languor, like an aging yet still beautiful courtesan in a smoke-filled room, and yet weary, too of ordent ways..." (pp. 10, 14).

Anderson recognized Faulkner's talent, but he was not sure that the city was his meter. "You're a country boy," he told him, "and all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from." And ultimately Faulkner himself realized that "my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and... that by sublimating the actual unto the apocryphal, I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have..., they were "Prominent" architecture pervades Faulkner's world, the buildings that elude and transcend chronology and reach from the earliest to the most recent times. Hard, tough structures, symbolic not only of the meanness of life for some, but also of the patience and persistence and endurance of the people who used them. In As I Lay Dying, the house was of "rough logs, from between which the chiming of his long-fallen Square, with a broken roof set at a single pitch, it leans in empty and shimmering delapidation in the sunlight, a single broad window in its two opposite walls giving on to the approaches of the path.""

In The Hamlet, Mink Broomes, after he has murdered one of his neighbors, returns to each a house. "It was dusk. He emerged from the bottom and looked up the slope of his meager and sorry corn and saw it—the paintless two-room cabin with its open hallway between and a lean-to kitchen, which was not his, on which he paid rent but not taxes... just like the one he had been born in, which had not belonged to his father either." Faulkner then juxtaposes Mink's house to the
spritisher environment of Jefferson, which Mink glimpses briefly upon being taken to jail, a richer world to which his brother, Rem, will gravitate at the end of the novel. The contrast is shattering. The survey moved "now beneath an ordered overarch of sambal trees between the clipped and tended lawns where children shrieked and played in small bright garments and the ladies sat rocking in the fresh dresses of afternoon and the men coming home from work turned into the neat painted gates toward plates of food and cups of coffee in the long beginning of twilight." 8

Yet it is structures such as Mink's that take us back to the actual beginnings of Jefferson, as described in the appendix to The Sound and the Fury. "A solid square mile of virgin North Mississippi dirt as truly zested as the dear center of a candle table top (forested then because these were the old days before 1833 when the store fell)," Jefferson, Mississippi was one long rambling one-story mud-chinked log building housing the Chickasaw Agent and his trading post store. 9

They are similar, these primitive houses, to the stores in Faulkner's work: social as well as commercial buildings, places to see and meet other people, to transact business, personal and commercial; important stages in Faulkner's world, of combings and goings and comings and intrusions, for the most rural people, a primitive window on a larger world. In the story "Blood Burning," Faulkner evokes the personal attributes of buildings, especially the smell, much in the manner of Proust's Remembrance of Things Past: "The store in which the Justice of the Peace's court was sitting smelled of cheese. The boy, crouched on his rail leg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more..." In The Hamlet, we encounter a store's "now deserted gallery, stained with tobacco and scarred with knives" (p. 83).

To his grandest characters, and to Faulkner himself, the most favored architecture was the neoclassical, especially the local version of the Greek Revival of the mid-nineteenth century, the symbol, even in decay, of the better impulses of Southern civilization. It recalled not only the glories of ancient Greece, but also the early nineteenth century Great War of independence, which brought to America and the whole Western world a reverence and passion for everything Greek.

The most important building in all of Faulkner's work was the neoclassical Yoknapatawpha County courthouse, not only the symbol of law and justice, but spiritually, psychologically, architecturally, the center around which life revolves. In one story,
Faulkner called the building "a dream dreamed by Thucydides." A crucial description in Requiem for a New links it to the Square surrounding it and to the larger town and county, one of many examples of Faulkner's interest in urban design: "the courthouse came first . . . and with stakes and hunks of limestone, the architect laid out in a grove of oaks opposite the tavern and the store, the square and simple foundations, the irrevocable design not only of the courthouse but of the town too, telling them as much: 'In fifty years you will be trying to change it in the name of what you will call progress. But you will fail . . . you will never be able to get away from it . . . a Square, the courthouse in its grove, the center, quadrangular around it, the stores, two-story, the offices of the lawyers and doctors and dentists, the lodge rooms and auditoriums, above them; school and church and tavern and jail each in its ordered place; the four broad diverging avenues straight as plumb-lines in the four directions, becoming the network of roads and by-roads until the whole county would be covered with it. . . ."

For the building itself, "eight disjointed marble columns were landed from an Italian ship at New Orleans, into a steamboat up the Mississippi to Vicksburg, and into a smaller steamboat up the Yazoo and Sunflower and Tallahatchie, to Ikmem-
noble's old landing which
Sunpen now owned, and
thence the twelve miles by
even into Jefferson; the
two identical four-column
porticoes, one on the north
and one on the south, each
with its balcony of wrought-
iron New Orleans grillwork,
on one of which—the south
one—in 1861 Sartoris would
stand in the first Confederate
uniform the town had ever
seen, while in the Square
below the Richmond mu-
stering officer enrolled
and swore in the regiment which
Sartoris as its colonel would
take to Virginia . . .” (p. 39).

Yet the greatest quantity of
neoclassical buildings, and,
next to the courthouse, the
largest and finest, were the
Greek Revival houses of
the Yoknapatawpha gentry,
symbols for Faulkner of a
quality of life and a quality
of people he admired despite
their flaws—and despite the
flaws of the society that
reared them, based upon
slavery and a black-white
slave system.

The most typical regional
form of the neoclassical
house was a nearly square
rectangular box with a
relatively small four-
columned porch on one
or more sides. Above the
front door there was fre-
quently another door lead-
ing on to a small balcony.
Faulkner was especially
intrigued with them in ruin,
a symbol of social, cultural,
and spiritual decay. In
Sanctuary, for example,
“The house was a gabled
ruin rising gaunt and stark
out of a grove of unplanted
cedar trees . . . a landmark
known as the Old French-
man place, built before the
Civil War; a plantation
house set in the middle of a
tract of land; of cotton fields
and gardens and lawns long
since gone back to jungle,
which the people of the
neighborhood had been
pulling down for firewood
for fifty years or digging
with secret and sporadic
optimism for the gold which
the builder was reputed to
have buried somewhere
about the place when Grant
came through the county on
his Vicksburg campaign.”

9 "Rowan Oak," home of William
The building, the decay, and sometimes the destruction of these houses are crucial both to the plot and to the ambiance of Faulkner’s work—from the Old Frenchman Place in Sanctuary to similar houses in town of the Compson, Sartoris, and DeSnays families, to the house and plantation, “Surpen’s Hundred,” in Absalom, Absalom.

It is especially difficult to imagine that novel without the prominence Faulkner gave to Surpen’s house, the symbol for Thomas Surpen of the status and security he craved and worked for, a status denied him earlier at another grand house when he had been asked by a haughty servant to go around to the back door. Surpen’s Hundred survived the war but not its aftermath, its “voting portico and scaling walls, not invaded, marked by no bullet or soldier’s iron heel, but rather as though reserved for something more: some desolation more profound than ruin...”

Architectural historians are frequently asked to demonstrate the effect of architecture on people. That is not easy, but in the story “Barn Burning,” Faulkner helps us by suggesting the effects of a great house on someone who did not live in it: “Presently he could see the grove of oaks and elms and the other flowering trees and shrubs where the house would be, though not the house yet. They walked beside a fence massed with honeysuckle and Cherokee roses and came to a gate swinging open between two brick pillars, and now, beyond a sweep of drive, he saw the house for the first time and at that instant he forgot his father and the terror and despair both, and even when he remembered his father again... the terror and despair did not return. Because, for all the twelve mornings, they had sojourned until now in a poor country, a land of small farms and fields and houses, and he had never seen a house like this before. “Hit’s big as a courthouse” he thought quietly, with a surge
of peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words, being too young for that" (p. 10).

The Greek Revival architecture of Yoknapatawpha County was indeed the perfect setting for Faulkner's Greek tragedies.

The neo-Gothic movement of the mid-nineteenth century was in one sense a revolt against the centuries-long domination of the neoclassical. Yet as another manifestation of Victorian Romanticism, it had much in common with its Greek Revival cousins. The Benbow house in Sartori was one of several neo-Gothic buildings in Yoknapatawpha. "From the gate, the cinder-packed drive rose in a grave curve between cedars... set out by an English architect of the '40s who had built the house (with the minor concession of a veranda) in the funereal light Tudor which the young Victoria had sanctioned" and around which "even on the brightest days lay a resonance exhilarating gloom."11

The finest public neo-Gothic building in Oxford is St. Peter's Episcopal Church (1854–1860), attributed to Richard Upjohn, the architect of Trinity Church, New York. "There is a small Episcopal church in Jeffer- son," Faulkner wrote in The Town, "built by slaves and called the best, the finest... by the northern tourists who passed through Jefferson now with cameras, expecting—we don't know why since they themselves had burned it and blown it up with dynamite in 1861—to find Jefferson much older or anyway older looking than it is and faulting us a little because it isn't"—almost a recognition and premonition, on Faulkner's part, of the fame Oxford had acquired and of the tourists it would draw because of him.12

St. Peter's, Faulkner's family church, also evoked this reverse as the story, "Knight's Gambit": "Then he was home: a paved street-crossing not very far from the house.
he had been born in, and
now he could see above the
trees the water tank and the
gold cross on the spire of the
Episcopal church . . . his
face pressed to the griny
glass as if he were eight years
old, the train slowing . . .
and there they were, seen as
the child of eight sees them,
with something of shock, set
punky yet amazingly durable
against the perspective of the
vast . . . earth.11

After the Civil War, even
in the South following
Reconstruction, people built
buildings the same way they
did business—with a grand,
aqueous, predatory zeal.
This was the age of Thor-
stein Veblen’s Conspicuous
Consumption and Vernon
Louis Barrington’s Great
Barbecue. The architectural
results were the styles of
High Victorian Gothic,
mansardic Second Empire,
Queen Anne, and their local
variants. Faulkner did not
care for these styles. He used
them to symbolize the curved
anxieties of the postwar New
South. The actual house of
his own great-grandfather in
Ripley reflected this state of
mind, as did the home of
Miss Emily Grierson in the
memorable story, “A Rose
for Emily,” in which, as the
writer Elizabeth Spencer has
noted, a sweet little old
Southern lady petitioned her
lover and “kept his corpse
around as a playmate.”12
Miss Emily lived in “a big
squashy frame house that
had once been white, deco-
rated with cupolas and spires
and scrolled balconies in the
heavily lightsome style of the
seventies, set on what had
once been our most select
street. But garages and cot-
ton gins had encroached and
obliterated even the august
names of that neighborhood,
only Miss Emily’s house
was left, lifting its stubborn
and coquettish decay above
the cotton wagons and the
gasoline pumps—an eyesore
among eyesores.”13

Faulkner, the literary mod-
crast, was least sympathetic
to the Modern Movement in
architecture, which pro-
claimed and celebrated the
twentieth-century machine
age. The only modern
building that Faulkner portrayed sympathetically was, significantly, connected with aviation. The New Voslo airport in the novel Pylon was “modernistic, spurious, suave, sonorous, and monastic,” the latter adjective a reference to its minimalist austerity. Its murals presented the “sac- rous, still, and legendary tale” of man’s conquering of “the infinite and impervious air.” With the exception of the airplane, Faulkner professed to hate machines: the automobile, the radio, and television. Modern architecture, which he correctly associated with these, finally reached Oxford in a splendid City Hall of 1938 by James Cantzees, built in the then-shocking style of “WPA Moderne.” Faulkner, himself, detested it. He liked to use modernist images to suggest evil and hollowness. In Sanctuary, for example, Popeye “walked, his tight suit and still had all angles, like a modernistic lampshade.” (p. 6).

Faulkner seemed to regret not only the appearance of modernism, but even more the disappearance of the world it replaced. He was upset in the 1940s by the demolition of the second-floor porches around the Oxford Square and by the needful destruction of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. To judge from the latter, he refused for years to enter the modern Kroger grocery store that replaced it. In Requiem for a Nun, he mounted the looser: “Gone now from the fronts of the stores are the brick made of native clay in Straton’s architect’s old moulds, replaced now by sheets of glass taller than a man and longer than a wagon and team, pressed intact in Pittsburgh vacuum and braving in- teriors bathed now in one shadowless coruscating of fluorescent light . . .” (p. 210).

Exceptions to Faulkner’s antimodern bias seemed to lie only in airports and in his fascination with tall buildings. In The Sound and the Fury, he wrote with apparent pleasure: “Father brought a watch charm from the Saint Louis Fair to Jason: a tiny opera glass into which you squinted with one eye and saw a skyscraper.”

Indeed, he came closest to being seduced by modernism in the excitement of the traffic and the architecture of the city. In Sanctuary, and more particularly in a story called “Dull Tale,” he seemed to enjoy the modern, urban environment: “Where Madison Avenue joins Main Street, where the trolleys swing crossing and glooming down the hill at the clanging of belts which warn and consummate the change of light from red to green, Memphis is almost a city . . . At Main and Madison . . . where four tall buildings quarter their flanks and form an expanded tunnel up which the disposition of traffic echoes as at the bottom of a well, there is the endless life and movement of cities; the hurrying and purposeful going to-and-fro.”

Though in general he dis- liked and disapproved of modernist architecture, Faulkner took an even grimmer view of literally rendered antique repro- ductions, the sphere of the Kupserne Snoopes. In The Mansion, he droolly described the Snoopes’ renov- ation of the old Dequina house, which, with all its new “columns,” still “wouldn’t be as big at Mount Vernon . . .” but then Mount Vernon was a thousand miles away so there wasn’t no chance of invidious or malicious eye to eye comparison.”

Faulkner was less defendably stubborn in his disdain for the subdivision of the old estates and the building of small, respectable tract houses for families of modest income, as in Avent Acres, Oxford, in Requiem for a Nun, we learn “there were new people in the town now, strangers, outlanders, living in new minute glasswalled houses set as neat and or- derly and antiseptic as crebs in a nursery yard, new subdivisions named Fairfield or Longwood or Halcyon Acres which had once been the lawn or backyard or kitchen garden of the old residences . . .” (p. 213).

Yet the quintessential state- ment of Faulkner on archi- tecture, on urban design, on the look and the layout of Jefferson, had come much earlier in a single passage from Sartoris, a passage that takes us back to the Square and courthouse—the center, the ravel of Yoknapatawpha: “They drove on and mounted the shidy, gradual hill to- ward the square, and Horace looked about happily on familiar scenes” as “street opened away beneath arches of green, shade, with houses a little older and more imposing as they got away from the station’s vicinity; and pedestrians, usually dawdling Negro boys at this hour or old men bound townward after their naps, to spend the afternoon in sober futile absorptions.”

“The hill flattened away into the plateau on which the town proper had been built these hundred years and more ago, and the street became definitely urban presently with garages and small shops with merchants in shirt sleeves, and custom- ers; the picture show with its lobby plastered with life episode in colored, litho- graphed mutations. Then the square, with its unbroken skyline of old weathered brick and faded dead names on shoulders that were smiling paint, and drifting Negroes in casual and careless O.D. garments . . . and country people in occasional khaki too; and the brisker urban- ities weaving among their placid chewing unhaile and among the men in tilted chairs before the stores.”

“The courthouse was of brick too, with stone arches
14 City Hall, Oxford, 1938.


16 Store fronts reflecting Confederate Monument, Oxford.

17 Main Street, Memphis, Tennessee, 1920s (courtesy, Cultural Collection).
rising among elms, and among the trees the monument of the Confederate soldier stood, his musket at order arms, shedding his carved eyes with his stone hand. Beneath the porticoes of the courthouse and on benches about the green, the city fathers sat and talked... (pp. 142–143).

For a writer as obsessed with time as Faulkner, the loss of time, the passage of time, the crucifixion of time, the presence of the past in the present, architecture offered, if not a stopping of time or prolongation of time, at least a way of carrying through time, of projecting over time, a very tangible part of the past. Faulkner saw and used architecture as the tangible past, the visible past. Buildings, Faulkner knew, were designed and constructed and observed and used by particular people in particular times, but he also knew that, if preserved and cared for, they could outlast the people who conceived them, outlast the generations that brought them into being, the generations for whom they stood as monuments and markers of identity. Faulkner was, of course, an architect of books, not of buildings, and he used words to do many of the same things. But he appreciated the fact that architecture and literature were very different art forms—in their tangible relationship to historical actuality.

Even the chaos of *The Sound and the Fury* ends in a final passage that suggests a kind of order, a suggestion rendered in architectural terms. Here, as elsewhere, Faulkner evoked, with words, the layers of connections between people and the built environment—relationships that cannot always be documented in visual representations. The passage centers on the Jefferson Square, based upon the Oxford Square, where, for most of the twentieth century, traffic has drifted generally to the right in a counter-clockwise direction. But in the early twentieth century, one could go to the left or to the right. Yet Benji, the idiot son of the Compson family, had an aversion to the clockwise
19 North Lamar Street looking toward Courthouse, Oxford.

20 Stores, Federal Building, approaching Courthouse Square, Oxford.
21 Vegetable Market,
Courthouse Square, Oxford.
direction—a strong need for the antidissolving course, a metaphor of Faulkner's for Benti's problems with time. “They approached the square, where the Confederate soldier gazed with empty eyes beneath his marble hand into wind and weather. I saw . . . the impervious Queenie a cat with the watch . . . and swung her to the left at the monument. For an instant Ben sat in an utter hush. Then he bellowed. Bellow on bellow, his voice mounted, with scarlet interval for breath . . . as Jason came jumping across the square and onto the step. ‘Don't you know any better than to take him to the left?’ he said. ‘Yes, un’h, Luster said. He took the reins and hit Queenie with the end of them . . . Ben's voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again . . . and at once Ben hurled . . . and his eyes were empty and blue and severe again as corsele and facade flowed smoothly once more from the right; post and tree, window and doorway, and sidewalk, each in its ordered place.” (pp. 335–336).

Thus, in work after work, Faulkner answered-reordering the question from Mosquitoes in asserting and demonstrating that architecture was not only “a part of life,” but an art that shaped and reflected its customers. And that in Jefferson, the town, it was surely among the things that made up the quest for what Jefferson the man, Jefferson the architect, had called “the pursuit of happiness.”

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Notes
1 William Faulkner, Mosquitoes (New York: Boll and Little, 1927), pp. 105–107. All further references to this work appear in the text.
6 Faulkner, The Hamlet (New York: Viking, 1956), pp. 251, 257. All further references to this work appear in the text.
11 Faulkner, Sanctuary (New York: Vintage, n.d.), pp. 7–8. All further references to this work appear in the text.
13 Faulkner, Sartoris (New York: New American Library, 1944), p. 143. All further references to this work appear in the text.
16 Elizabeth Spencer, “Emerging as a Writer in Faulkner’s Mississippi,” Lecture at the “Faulkner and Yoknapatwpha” conference at the University of Mississippi, August 1982.