AN ARCHITECTURE THESIS

by

SUSAN E. MOUZON

Ball State University

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This book is dedicated to Mother and Dad for their constant support, encouragement, and guidance, and to Samuel for his unconscious inspiration and love.
CREDITS

Jack Wyman, Studio Critic
Dr. Bruce Meyer, Architectural Critic
Alvin E. Palmer, Architectural Critic
Dr. Arno Wittig, Psychology Critic
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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

There is a potential hazard in the architectural profession of becoming more concerned with personal achievements than with the well-being of the user. The architect, as with any artist, may easily become egomanical in the creation of his work. If the architect feels gratification and self-esteem through the achievement of an architecture which recognizes and responds to the needs of the participant, the ego can be a positive driving force in his work. However, the self-aggrandisement of the designer as a primary objective cannot be a part of humane architecture.

This thesis began with the goal of producing an ego-less architecture, an architecture concerned primarily with the psychological and physical well-being of the user. Over the course of the year I realized I was relying on my own intuitions and emotions rather than those of the participants because I had infrequent access to them and their reactions. Finding the design capturing the spirit of North Alabama and Paint Rock, this realization was disconcerting. Designing from my experience as a Southerner rather than that of the user's was apparently a contradiction to my thesis.

Upon reflection, I realized it was this shared experience that gave life to the design. Empathy with the participant is necessary, but for a design to possess vitality and excitement, the designer must give a part of herself to it. Trying to design only for the user, without self-actualization, would rob the design of the delight which comes from making it a part of oneself.

Thus, rather than proving a thesis, this is the documentation of the evolution of a thesis. Beginning the year with the goal of immersing myself in the experience of the participant, I discovered the excitement of participating myself. The realization of this shared experience between myself and the people of Paint Rock is by far a richer design than one lacking the inclusion of the designer.
From the conception of this thesis, the primary goal was to develop and document a process, thus it seems logical that the book should be chronologically structured. However, this format by no means implies completion or conclusion of either thesis or project; it is merely a record of a series of experiences, both emotional and architectural. I would hesitate to assume such a personal experience could be of considerable interest to anyone less involved in it than I. Thus, the purpose of the book, other than being a professorial requirement, is rather a selfish one. I feel that writing of my impressions and beliefs is perhaps the only way to achieve the clarity of thought I desire.
Questions of seemliness aside, there is perhaps a central fallacy in the exercise of any designer explaining herself as a way of introducing her work. Any idea, thesis, or design ought to be larger and more interesting than the designer herself. Although to have life, the design must be a part of the designer, perhaps more importantly, it should be hoped that the "person" of the designer will remain more or less subordinate to that of the participant. The teller is simply not that important. What she tells is.

Nevertheless, for accessory illumination upon the thoughts and emotions of a Southerner, and with an advisory to the reader that it is only after these several pages that the true business begins, I furnish this personal preface.

About seventy years after the War Between the States, a popular suspicion began to emerge that the South still remained incorrigibly unlike the rest of the United States in some elemental and darkly meaningful way. Central to this notion of the South's singularity has been a vision of the white Southerner as something like the lost and haunted "Ishmael of American history," and no one proved fonder of this proposition than certain cultivated circles of white Southerners themselves. Much of this vision was made up, no doubt, of that slightly haggard romanticism indigenous to the region. But it was no less a reality for that. However illusory by all exterior perspectives, romanticism nevertheless largely determined and directed the course of affairs in the South, both private and public. It was taken, and acted on, as the reality of things, and so by that measurement constituted the effective reality. This sense of comprising some spiritual order of the outcast and benighted -- a kind of perversely, left-handedly chosen people -- was all the more beguiling to Southerners because the rest of the nation seemed so ready to collaborate in the conceit.

But no matter how tatty a commonplace it became, the final truth is that the South did long constitute something like another country within the map of the United States. It amounted to something like America's Scotland, or America's Catalonia. For the last decade or two, as the South has industriously undertaken to alchemize itself into a replica of Pasadena, its old simple passionate definitions of life have begun to wane and diffuse except in those small, yet isolated, communities of the rural South.

While the rest of American history has
been most notable for an eager and nimble application to the possibilities of the moment, it remained the peculiarity of the South that it always seemed somehow vaguely adrift and lost in time. It was as if it had been overly memoried. The shades of other ages, not only of its own grave, gray, tragic Crusade but of even remoter periods such as Arthurian England, lingered over its sunstricken stretches like multiple overlays of nostalgia -- as if it were a region hung in some old abiding implosion of history. The first ransacking swarm of Anglo-Saxons left behind them placid villages named out of yet another past: Canaan, Bethany, Zion, Hebron, Moab -- the primeval geographies of the Old Testament reinvoked, four thousand years later, among red hills and gullies and broomsage fields on the other side of the globe. At the same time, vagrant filtrations from another antiquity eddied over the South's interior, with communities named Carthage and Troy and Corinth, and planters and barristers out in the obscure reaches of Alabama and South Carolina sitting on their back galleries the whole of a long hot Sunday afternoon, surrounded by a locust-stitching emptiness of loblolly pines and limitlessly level cottonland, reading Tacitus and Livy in the original tongue.

This habitual intercourse with the past no doubt partly accounted for that sense of the South as somehow older than the calendar counted -- older, in a way, than Philadelphia or Boston or even Plymouth Rock. To the rest of the country, it often seemed as alien as Syria or Afghanistan -- an insular territory of cave beliefs and shotgun violences and scruffy hills where, after dark, solitary horned cows wandered the mild dust of back roads under a calm mottled moon. It was as if, finally, the South belonged to a time before the Western hemisphere was even suspected -- was, at the instant of its emergence, already as profoundly old as Mesopotamia or Ur. And in a sense, it was.

For one thing, for over two and a half centuries, well before and well beyond the War Between the States, the South was, with slavery and then its sequel, absorbed in an interior, collective experience wholly outside the general American sensibility of innocence and rationality and optimism -- an experience belonging in fact to an older and direr script about the human situation. While the epic of the West was a physical experience as immense and furious as the South's providing the United States with its only approximation of a true national romance, still it was principally an exterior happening, a simple, single-minded exertion outward against exterior circumstances of earth and weather and
anonymous adversaries. But unlike the Western adventure, the South's experience was both an exterior and an interior happening. The convulsions of slavery and then the war and the hundred years that followed were matched by an equally turbulent inner conflict. It was an outer violence that simultaneously exploded inward upon a whole people's spirit and vision. In embarking on the kind of folk war it did over a century ago -- pitching into it so much of pride and risk, however inflationary and illusory that headlong investment may have been to the actual circumstances that occasioned it -- the South could not really afford to lose. But it did, in full measure to the extravagance of its commitment, cataclysmically. And it was in trying then to abide that insupportable defeat -- and the even more implacable irreconcilability that followed it, the incapacity to forget -- that the personality of the South was completed. In a nation that began as a foundling and waif of history and that still, after some three hundred years, had not concluded who it was and what it was for, the South -- dwelling in an ancient memory of itself, with an extra sense, an inner ear, for the long melancholy music of time -- became the one region of the country with its own active interior mythos, its own tragic legend of blood and fire and guilt - most critically, guilt.

Along with this, and perhaps as important, while the rest of the nation was massively mutating into metropolises and factories and brokerage houses, the South lingered on as a civilization of villages -- indeed, a kind of tribal society, still belonging more to the earth than to machines or systems, living close to the skin and the simple passions of mortality. It answers to a tribal sense of community made up not so much of documents or ideas, but of the old blood values of common earth and common weather, common adversities and celebrations, common memory. The Southerner always tends to believe with his blood rather than his intellect.

It is from this heritage and for this people that I have designed.
"Alabama felt a magic descending, spreading, long ago. Since then it has been a land with a spell on it - not a good spell, always. Moons, red with the dust of barren hills, thin pine trunks barring horizons, festering swamps, restless yellow rivers, are all a part of a feeling - a strange certainty that above and around them hovers enchantment - an emanation of malevolence that threatens to destroy men through dark ways of its own."

Carl Carmer
The Stars Fell On Alabama
PHILOSOPHY

My thesis, being a further evolution of my architectural beliefs and philosophy has been influenced by many events and experiences. The most evocative experience is, of course, my Southern heritage and childhood environment. I believe these have directed me in the path I have followed throughout my education.

Architecturally, the first project significant to my philosophy occurred third year. The program was a house in Muncie for which we had an actual client. My goal for the design was a home rather than merely a house. I wanted each space to become a "place." Each space was then designed with a concern for how it would emotionally affect the participant. It was a beginning.

The following spring I had the privilege of participating in a Studio Abroad in Florence, Italy. This is when I actually began to formulate beliefs about what architecture should be. We were given a site and a building type, but no program. This not only was the first time I had the opportunity to consider what spaces should compose a building, but also consider the needs of the society using the space. Before thinking about the functions and uses of the building, it was necessary to try to understand the Italians as a user group. This involved exposure to their social habits, history, religion, arts and literature, in short, an immersion of myself into their culture.

At this point, I began to recognize the assumptions architects make about their clients. Architecture should be the broadest of professions, however, it is most frequently the simplest of solutions to a functional problem, similar to those executed in school. The architect, even if considering the design with attention to form, space, and image, seldom acquaints himself intimately enough with the client to understand his social and psychological needs.

Shortly after the Studio Abroad, I served my architectural internship which served to reinforce these notions. Although working with a firm comprised of Southerners in a Southern city, I quickly realized the failure of the assumptions being made even concerning other Southerners. It was soon evident to me that even if one is generally acquainted with a society, gross misjudgements are likely to occur unless one can see past the economics of the "architecture."

As with any art form, it seems architecture is prone to develop, particularly in those of considerable talent, considerable "egos." It is
understandable that the architect would want to incorporate himself and his own image into that which he designs, and in many respects this can foster a humane result. If an architect feels gratification and self-esteem through the achievement of architecture for people, his ego can be a positive driving force. However, the self-aggrandisement of the designer has no place in the realization of an architecture that the participants can make their own.
PROCESS

Over the past few years I began to acquire a set of beliefs that formed the cornerstone of my thesis. However at the beginning of the year it was merely a vague accumulation of feelings that suggested a direction I wanted to explore. I was not sure where the experiences of the year would lead me, and was excited by the idea of a spontaneous, thought-provoking process.

Believing that architecture is not for architects, but rather people, and whatever architects may assume or theorize, it is through the senses that people appreciate, that people feel architecture; I was in search of a sensitive, empathic process. During the summer, I became intrigued by the idea of inductive rather than deductive design. Since my thesis was to be intuitive, emotional, and subjective, the idea of a prescribed series of premeditated activities was intolerable.

Ideally, the process would not follow a deductive path, but rather an inductive one which would build up layers of detail or information in research, programming, and design simultaneously. The initial stimulus came from my own emotional response as a Southerner. I believe this freedom to follow an inspired thought ultimately results in all facets of the design becoming more intertwined, and thus the result harmonious and consistent. Using this process, there are actually no specific activities that can be defined as "research," "programming," or "design development," rather, all become integral parts of a holistic process.
I began to think about the relationship of thesis to project toward the end of my internship. I knew I wanted to investigate a process of becoming acquainted with the participant, recognizing and understanding his needs and expectations. The first task of identifying a vehicle for my thesis was the choice of user. I considered the alternatives of choosing a group with which I had shared experiences and common values or, as with the Italian studio, one which was foreign to me. Almost immediately I chose to use a North Alabama context, thus eliminating superfluous research.

Knowing the cultural influence of my Southern heritage, as well as the subjective content of my thesis, would likely affect my design in an emotional, intuitive manner, I wanted to choose a building type that should evoke an emotional response in the user. My conclusion was a schoolhouse. As A. S. Neil says in *Summerhill*: "In Education, intellectual development is not enough. Education must be both intellectual and emotional. In modern society we find increasing separation between intellect and feeling. The experiences of man today are mainly experiences of thought rather than an immediate grasp of what his heart feels, his eyes see, and his ears hear...the aim of education is to work joyfully and find happiness." I found the challenge and responsibility of designing an environment that would accomplish this goal immense.

The second part of the design, the town hall, developed with the selection of the site. I was doing my internship in Huntsville, Alabama, so in the evenings and on weekends I began to drive through the small towns and communities looking for an appropriate site.
The drive from Huntsville to Paint Rock gradually prepares you for the geographical and cultural differences in the two towns. Highway 72 leaves Huntsville over the end of Monte Sano mountain which marks the beginning of "the country." The mountains begin to rise on either side of the cotton fields in many blue layers.

Passing a few small communities clustering close to the highway, you begin to notice the hills rolling in closer to the road with each advancing mile. Occasional roadside gas stations and general stores advertise their merchandise and hospitality with red and white Coca Cola signs. The road is frequently marked by concrete bridges spanning the Flint River and its many branches.

Leaving Gurley, yet another small town, you quickly enter the Paint Rock River Valley, passing the road that wanders off to the left for such mountain towns as Trenton, Hollytree, Princeton, and Skyline. Immediately the road curves to the right, hugging the foot of the mountain that has now swallowed up the cotton fields. Ahead and to the left, the narrow, fertile valley moves between the foothills of the Cumberlands. Rounding the curve, the mountain steps back slightly, and a few white clapboard houses rest in its shadow. They are each amply shaded by a profusion of trees in addition to the inevitable lavender wisteria embracing the porches. Within the next mile, the density of the dwellings increases until, unless you have specific business there, you have passed Paint Rock in a quick flash of color.

The town is actually little more than a commercial strip to the east of the highway consisting of five or six businesses and a small residential community to the west. Each of the commercial buildings, with the exception of the brick factory producing candy and tobacco products, the commercial buildings are made of painted block. You pull directly off the road into the strip parking. There are the two or three inevitable pickup trucks with their lowered tailgates that serve as the "front porch" to the businesses. The general store, having the advantage of being the only air conditioned building in town, and the town hall, housed in an old service station, serve as the town gathering places in which to discover whether Aunt Clara got over the shingles or if Little Debbie really got that scholarship to Vanderbilt.

The dirt road leading east between the town hall and the candy factory passes the ruins of a once prosperous train station, crosses the rusty tracks being slowly choked by Johnson grass, moves down a shallow incline beneath a canopy of
willows, and halts at the bank of the Paint Rock River. At this point the river is shallow and clear, and flows over a bed of limestone, ideal for wading. This is the most popular place in town for the children and teenagers, whether it's for an energetic battle with a large mouth bass, or a romantic evening in the moonlight. With the trees' branches entwining over the river, the cool, green banks are a refreshing respite from the summer heat.

To the west of the highway, a narrow band of grass, and occasionally woods, isolates the houses from the traffic. You can enter the neighborhood from one of three streets, among which there seems to be no special hierarchy or relationship. Driving west along any of the three, there barely seems to be room for your car, so there is a constant apprehensive anticipation of meeting another car. The east/west roads lead directly up to the foot of the mountain with the last row of houses actually perching on the hill. Driving through the area, the initial impression is of the generosity and extravagance of nature, with the profusion of blooming azaleas and rhododendrons, pecans and oaks stretching their branches over each house and the road, and the wisteria or roses embracing the columns of almost every porch. Through the abundance of vegetation you gradually become aware of the age and decrepitude of the structures. However, the neatness of the yards and cover of blossom lend the indigent houses an air of charm and an impression of hospitality. The feeling is emphasized by the frequent occupant of a porch swing's indolent wave or casual "hey there."
Knowing the local elementary school children must bus over twenty miles to school, this community was ideal. It possessed the need, but as important, Paint Rock exhibited the spirit and independence of the rural South, the participant I was looking for. My choice was made.

The site is adjacent to Highway 72, directly across from the town hall and commercial strip. It is a long site consisting of a knoll above the highway sloping down to a flat meadow. It stretches back into the neighborhood, defined by a fence row of maples, oaks, and crepe myrtle. Looking in any direction from the site, one sees the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. To the east lies the Paint Rock River valley.

Spending time in Paint Rock, talking to the inhabitants and becoming familiar with the community, I felt the town suffers from a lack of image. There is no space or structure that symbolizes or represents the community. This is most evident in the town hall. Traditionally, town halls occupy a place of prominence in a community and through classical forms and rich materials present an image of which the community is proud. In Paint Rock, as mentioned previously, the town hall is housed in an old gas station. Talking to the citizens of Paint Rock about government buildings, I realized they never refer to their own town hall, but rather the courthouses in Huntsville and Scottsboro. The awareness of this need for an image, as well as the functional need for a new facility, resulted in a decision to include a town hall in my project program. With the inclusion of the town hall, I was essentially involving the entire community.
FALL QUARTER

READINGS

My first goal was to become intimately acquainted with Paint Rock and develop an emotional involvement with the community. Fall quarter I read a variety of books ranging from scientific behavioral studies to Southern folk tales.

Initially, my interest led to readings concerning theoretical and empirical perspectives of the relationship between humans and their environment. These books ranged from educational and environmental psychology to cultural anthropology. I was in search of a beginning point, a familiarity with existing behavioral studies. Although I discovered data that applied to my thesis such as Irwin Altman's Children and the Environment and Paul Insel's Too Close For Comfort, I realized the hard data I was absorbing had little relationship to the goal of designing for a specific participant.

I then approached the problem from the other extreme. I began to study folk tales and music of North Alabama as well as some local primitive art. Immediately I recognized Paint Rock in these songs and stories. There was an expression of the same independence, sense of the past, and overtone of mystery. The most informative of these was Carl Carmer's The Stars Fell On Alabama. This documentary of the people of Alabama has a cultural anthropological basis, although its main goal is to tell the story of "a strange country...a land of enchantment."
PRECONCEPTIONS

A concern expressed at the beginning of the quarter was what my preconceptions were and to what extent they would bias my design. I decided the best course of action would be to define these and evaluate them immediately. I felt the best manner in which to recognize my preconceptions would be through design. At that time, the most pressing questions were generally formal and contextural. Should there be one building or two? How should the new building(s) relate to the Post Office and the commercial strip? What is the best way to arrive at flexibility and variety in the schoolrooms?

My initial decision was to design the schoolhouse and town hall separately. I felt this was necessary to present a strong identity for both children and government. In addition, two buildings could begin to form a positive exterior space. This presented the consideration of the inclusion of a fire station as well. Some of the concerns included natural lighting and ventilation, imagery, and the individual's interaction with the spaces. Both the schoolhouse and the town hall became buildings organized around central spaces.

The schoolhouse had a central auditorium/lunchroom cum activities space which was volumetrically a cube. Naturally lit by clerestories and ventilated by a cupola, this space was flanked by the two schoolrooms. Since each schoolroom would accommodate three classes, the primary objective was variety. Each schoolroom was composed of an entry, a large central space, a teacher's alcove, a reading room, and a porch. Through manipulations of doors these spaces could virtually become one.

The dominant space of the town hall was naturally the meeting room. The mayor's office, clerk's office and support spaces became saddlebags along the perimeter. To support the Paint Rock tradition of "tailgate-sitting," a gathering space was needed facing the highway. This was manifested in the porch which wraps around the east side, terminating at either end with the mayor's office and the clerk's office.

The design came so quickly it was almost disconcerting. My understanding of, and comfort with, North Alabama folk architecture was evident. The majority of my preconceptions seemed to involve form, materials, and details. Although, to this point, most of my decisions were architectonic, the design stimulated my interest in another direction. One of the spaces in the schoolhouse was a reading
room which immediately attracted my interest. I went back and tried to re-design it considering the child's perspective and interest. This in turn initiated a form of presentation that was to prove most effective, the perspective. It seemed the only way to graphically evaluate space from the participant's view, the goal of my thesis. Although I realized this design was by no means final, I felt comfortable with it and confident the people of Paint Rock would as well.
INTERIM

FIELD TRIP WEEK

Field trip week came at an opportune time. Happy with my progress, I was anticipating the communication with Paint Rock. The first trip out after arriving in Huntsville succeeded in re-immersing me in the spirit of the community.

Immediately after parking my car by the town hall, I crossed the highway to the site. The Johnson grass reached my thighs and the trees along the fence row were still a vivid green. I sat in the grass to sketch and found myself inclosed in a warm, living world of sound and smell, out of sight of the curious farmers lounging on their tailgates across the street. To my wonder, I felt a childish delight at my seclusion and decided some of the site must be left in this charming state.

My specific goals for the week centered around interviews and observation, hoping to discover some answers to the questions raised by the initial design. I quickly discovered the citizens of the town had little time (or was it desire?) to talk to a student concerning an "imaginary" project. My best resources became the old folks who simply wanted someone to talk to. From them I realized Paint Rock was not nearly so typically Southern as I imagined.

Traditionally being an economically depressed community, the inhabitants of the Paint Rock valley refused to participate in the War Between the States. They had always been dirt farmers and few, if any, owned slaves. The people of Jackson County went on record in Montgomery as saying "they reckoned they would stay out of the fuss." After the war started, Confederate soldiers shot and hung many men from the Paint Rock valley as deserters. In retaliation, many others joined the Union army. This action seems typical of Paint Rock's determination and independance. This became an issue to deal with when I began to design the town hall.

In response to questions concerning schoolhouse imagery, the concerns of the folk I talked with seemed to deal with the land, vegetation and age. Their descriptions of a "schoolhouse" usually concentrated on the views out, the connection with the land. Their descriptions also included many adjectives describing age. The preoccupation with age was also prevalent in any discussion of architecture. Paint Rock apparently was not anxious to move into the Space Age along with Huntsville.

My last day in Paint Rock was an especially beautiful one. The sky was a deep blue, a light breeze was blowing, and autumn was in the air. I decided to take a vacation from the interviews and sketch book
and took a blanket down to the river for a picnic with my three year old nephew. With a cane pole along for inspiration - or maybe it was the fresh pecan pie - we immediately attracted the attention of a small group of boys who were endeavoring to catch their dinner. Lying in the sunshine watching the antics of the children, I felt again the timelessness of those mountains. Although universally human, these were a people with an awareness and reverence of their past. This, then, was the essence of what I wanted to achieve in my design.
WINTER QUARTER

CONCLUSIONS

Winter Quarter began with the designer's equivalent of writer's block. Unfortunately my comfort with the initial design resulted in a sense of complacency. Changing or developing the design became a real chore. In an effort to break loose of this tentativeness and generate new ideas, the studio participated in a four hour charrette of my project.

Although the results were surprisingly similar, there were a few whimsical, innovative schemes. The charrette stimulated ideas that enabled me to make some final resolutions before Christmas break. The first of these was to have multiple buildings rather than one or two. This was to be a clustered arrangement similar to the relationships between Cumberland houses and their outbuildings. The connections would be both built and suggested. This solution would accomplish many things. It eliminates the static plasticity of independent structures. Since all buildings were located on the front portion of the site, their proximity to one another increased the importance of the relationships between the respective occupants. With the functions partially separated by outdoor spaces and/or community spaces, privacy lacking in a single building solution would be provided to both government and school activities. With each function located in an individual building, identity would be strengthened, however, the close connections would reinforce the sense of community.

A conclusion was also reached concerning the site. All buildings were to be located on the front portion of the site for two reasons. This would eliminate the feeling of isolation for the school children and also reinforce the imagery through visibility to the road. The entry would occur from Knolton road rather than the highway to create a sense of ritual, arrival, event. In addition, this would be safer than direct entry from the highway. For further safety, as well as to slow traffic down to recognize the town, a traffic light would be located at the intersection of Knolton and Highway 72. Some type of barrier, "wall," would run the length of the site to recognize the commercial wall opposite, determine a boundary, provide seating and a barrier between people and cars. The options considered included a low stone wall, hedge, or picket fence.

Other concerns included the importance of the visual link between interiors and the land, the representation of Paint Rock's image to the public, and the versatility, variety, and personalization potential of the schoolrooms. By this time, my interests
had reached beyond the "architectural" into the behavioral. This was largely a result of the field trip to Paint Rock as well as the days spent there over Thanksgiving. Any time spent there redirected my thoughts to the people, their rituals, customs, expectations, and dreams. It seemed Paint Rock was indeed an emotional inspiration.