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ART IN ARCHITECTURE - SOME HUNTSVILLE EXAMPLES -

Harvie P. Jones, F.A.I.A.

People throughout history have used art to raise the spaces they occupy to a cultural and symbolic level above that of mere shelter. The definition of the art of “architecture” versus “building” is that architecture goes beyond bare functional needs and attempts to address the human spirit and esthetic sense. “Art in Architecture” could be defined as architectural features which require artistic skills of sculpture, mosaics, or painting that are different from those of the architect.

The earliest known examples of what could be called art in architecture are perhaps the cave paintings of France, which date back to the Cro-Magnon period, up to 35,000 years ago. The cave paintings are thought to be ceremonial and religious rather than mere decoration or a recording of successful hunts, and much of the history of art in architecture to the present day addresses these same symbolic purposes. The ancient temples of Egypt, Greece, and Rome served the



(1) Egyptian relief carving in stone, 1370 B.C. The Egyptians used murals, reliefs and sculptured architectural elements in their buildings. Their tapered columns with base, shaft and plant-like capitals must surely have influenced the development of the later Greek forms, for the basic elements and ideas are quite similar.

same symbolic and ceremonial ends in a vastly more refined and ambitious way. Much architectural art has also been devoted to glorifying particular rulers, their battles, and power. Yet, we know that art was used to make ancient dwellings (be they palaces or ordinary houses) more pleasant places in which to live. The excavated Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, covered by volcanic ash in A.D. 79, have provided us with many intact examples of such domestic art in the form of murals, mosaics, and sculptured architectural elements.



The best "art in architecture" is that which is inseparably integrated into the building elements rather than merely applied like an after-thought. A Greek ionic column is a structural member, yet it is much more. It is a work of high art, involving a sophisticated yet simple use of geometry in plotting the gentle swell of the column shaft, the spiral curve of the vaults and the elliptical cross-

(2) **The Roman Forum.** These 2,000 year-old sculptured "orders" (columns & cornices) were influenced by those of the conquered Greeks, but were altered in proportion to express the power of the Roman civilization.

sections of the base-moulds. Its proportions were refined over a considerable time period. The earliest examples were quite crude in comparison to the later ones.

The ancient Greek temples have

an air of restrained intellectual sophistication (except in their coatings of wildly bright paints such as turquoise and red-orange, long ago washed off but evidenced by paint traces and excavated intact structures). By contrast, the medieval Gothic churches and cathedrals exuded a feeling of vigorous but crude spirituality (which effectively overwhelmed the intellectual aura of their highly sophisticated structural systems). The Renaissance saw a return to sophistication and refinement with the new and original use of the classical forms and "orders" first developed by the ancient Greeks, and then modified by the Romans 1,500 years before the Renaissance.

The Baroque period following the Renaissance retained the ancient classical elements but used them in a highly exuberant and experimental manner. The word "baroque" originally meant a misshapen pearl, and was a term of derogation for the "misshapen" Baroque architecture. "Gothic" was similarly a derogatory term. In our own era, the now-beloved post-Impressionist painters of early-twentieth century France were initially labeled "wild beasts" (Les Fauves) by a critic. New art is apparently never comfortable art, at first.

Frank Lloyd Wright, probably America's greatest architect (and who integrated abstract art into an inseparable and organic part of his buildings), was not accepted and recognized by the architectural establishment until he was an old man.

The 18th century American version of the English Georgian style was an outgrowth of the 16th century Baroque. Its elements of sculpture included broken pediments, urns, and heavy-turned and sculptured balusters: all classical elements derived from the ancient Roman/Greek forms but heavily modified to suit 18th century tastes.

Perhaps as a reaction to the heaviness of the Georgian, the Federal Period (called Neoclassical in England) emphasized lightness and delicacy. Classical elements were still used in the Federal Period but were totally transformed in effect by extreme attenuation. Columns were very slender and mouldings were thin, stretched, and light. Paint colors were rich, bright, and multi-hued (George Washington's recently restored dining room at Mt. Vernon is a good and carefully-researched example). Huntsville has a number of fairly intact Federal Period examples. One that is both re-

stored and accessible is the 1819 Maria Howard Weeden House museum. Another accessible example is the reconstructed Constitution Hall Village.

The Greek Revival of circa 1835-55 (in Huntsville) saw a return to heaviness of scale, this time based more on ancient Greek proportions and forms.

Architecture, along with all esthetic endeavors, has always been see-sawing from one extreme to another, and as the 19th century wore on, the see-saw speeded up to a dizzying pace with several competing styles proceeding simultaneously, and with admixtures of several sty-



listic influences incorporated in many single buildings. The latter part of the 19th century included such styles as Gothic Revival, Italianate, Romanesque Revival, Egyptian Revival, Queen Anne, Eastlake, Stick Style, Second Empire, Beaux Arts Classical, and others, all loosely lumped together as "Victorian."

The first half of the 20th century was the heyday of both abstract art and "abstract" architecture. It was felt that buildings of pure geometry, properly proportioned, were all the "art" that was needed, and were expressive of modern machine

(3) 1835 tomb in Maple Hill Cemetery signed by the Huntsville architect George Steele. A small and elegant example of the Greek Revival in sculptured limestone. Maple Hill Cemetery is a vast sculpture-garden with statuary, stained glass, cast iron, and a 170-year assortment of funerary art. In the 19th century, cemeteries such as Maple Hill were designed as places for pleasant Sunday strolls, and if you can subdue any hangups about death, they are still so. Many strollers can be seen in Maple Hill, for they know a pleasant and interesting place for a walk when they see it.



(4) The Church of the Nativity, 1859. Detail of ornament cast into the Gothic-Revival gatepost. This gatepost is an example of mid-19th century industrialization; an identical design can be found at a Mobile cemetery. Cast-iron building components in 1859 could be picked out of catalogues just as most parts for buildings are today.

(5) Overall view of the cast-iron gate at the 1859 Church of the Nativity.





(6) First Methodist Church, circa 1870. This Romanesque-Revival church building has characteristic round-top windows whose arch bolection-moulds rest on sculptured heads, just as seen in the 10th century European Romanesque works. The grouping of the windows in pairs is an Italianate device, an example of two stylistic influences in a single building.

(7) Victorian porch, corner of Randolph and White Streets. Architects today should relearn the use of shadows in design. The Victorians understood very well, as this example attests.



technology. Where conventional art was incorporated it was usually as an independent object used as counterpoint, a famous and successful example being the German architect Mies Van Der Rohe's 1929 "Barcelona Pavilion" wherein a modern statue's organic forms, carefully placed in a courtyard, set off the crisp and planar geometry of the small and elegant exhibition building.

The later half of the 20th century has seen a return to exploration of classical forms (in a new and shallow "post-modern" fashion already declared "dead" by the arbiters of architectural fashion). The plethora of recent buildings with triangular-top gable appliques with a circular or semi-circular opening in the triangle is the "hallmark cliché" of "Post Modern." It is a motif first used (elegantly) by the Italian architect Andrea Palladio in the 16th century and now used in a casual knee-jerk fashion on buildings of every sort.

The latest architectural movement, about 10 years old, is "Deconstruction," which looks suspiciously close kin to the old "Constructivism" of the early 20th century. We also have with us "Modern Revival" where the early 20th-century idioms of the

architect Le Corbusier are warmed-over, expanded, and presented as something brand-new. In sum, the later half of the 20th century is an age of architectural eclecticism rivaling that of the Victorian latter 19th century (not even mentioned are "New Brutalism," "High Tech," the "Metabolists," or several other now-forgotten latter 20th century "movements"). There are no accepted current "right answers", so the architectural journals generally attempt to judge buildings on their design quality rather than on their philosophy or antecedents. If history is any guide, a new "right answer" is just around the turn of the century. Whether it will incorporate art as an organic part of the building or as an afterthought add-on, we will have to wait and see.

When first approached by the Huntsville Museum of Art about the subject of Huntsville "Art in Architecture" my offhand and unthinking response was "I don't think we have any of that." I was wrong. A few minutes' reflection brought to mind many examples of all types. Communities which are bigger and richer will have both more and finer examples. Until the mid 20th century, Huntsville was a small town of about the present population of Athens, and rich and

numerous examples of art in architecture are not to be expected. But the collection is well worth a tour to see. Walking is required. Nothing of any detail can be seen or appreciated from a moving

automobile.

The best areas to tour are the historic downtown areas (with public entry available into the several churches and museums), the

Twickenham and Old Town historic districts, and Maple Hill Cemetery. Guide books are available at the Madison County Tourism Board in the Courthouse. Instead of generally and vaguely looking, as most of us normally do, look at details. The form and shape of a column capital, cornice, cast-iron fence post, or even a shadow of an architectural element can be quite beautiful. You will not see such things at 15 m.p.h. in a car.



(8) Adams Street, shadows of a fence combining cast and wrought iron elements enliven an ordinary concrete walk. The shadow is more attractive than the object itself.

The following photographs, all but two from Huntsville, deliberately blank off general views to force you to see the details, which

I wager most viewers will not recognize without reading the captions.

This small selection of details is just a taste of what there is to see for those with an eye for beauty.



(9) Fence of cast and wrought iron elements combined, 310 Williams Avenue, date unknown, perhaps late 19th century. An example of decorative elements economically mass-produced by casting in a mould.



(10) Schiffman Building, 1895, East Side of Square. A fine, lively example of Romanesque Revival, where the idea seemed to be that absolutely nothing lines up or matches, with results that brighten the day of the observer. This is a bracket, carved in stone.



(11) Schiffman Building, 1895, wrought iron basement grille. A utilitarian device treated in an artistic way. A lesson that needs to be relearned.

(12) Schiffman Building, 1895, side-entry stone arch. The fact that only the springer stones of the arch have foliated carving makes them seem more elegant than if all the stones were carved; an example of the power of contrast.



(13) Schiffman Building, 1895, polished brass entry lock.

(14) Struve Building, 1900, Washington Street and Clinton Avenue. Again we see familiar classical elements such as floral swags, an acanthus leaf, and moulded cornices, this time in painted stamped sheet-metal. This method of making fireproof and inexpensive large-scale ornaments for commercial buildings prevailed in the latter 19th century. A number of examples survive in downtown Huntsville, but the naked-looking building tops on the south side of the Square have unfortunately lost their large and elaborate metal cornices.



(15) May and Cooney Dry-Goods Store, 1913, East Side of the Square. Terra cotta floral and geometric forms combining several bright ceramic fused colors. The feeling here is Art Nouveau, particularly in the “M & C” logo at the arch ends. The use of multiple bright glaze colors is unusual for terra cotta.



(16) Terry-Hutchens Building, 1925, Clinton Avenue. An example of "Commercial Gothic" in terra cotta, like the 1928 Times Building but completely different in feeling. The difference is the absence here of the Art Deco influence that is strong in the Times Building.



(17) Terry-Hutchens Building, 1928, Clinton Avenue. The top floor window sills of this "Commercial Gothic" office building have gargoyles of bright green glazed terra cotta frogs, each about 12 inches tall. A delightful example of humor and fun in architecture, as was true of their original use in Romanesque and Gothic structures of medieval Europe.



(18) Wall of concrete inverted arches and chain swags, McClung Avenue. Probably 19-teens, as is the house it fronts. A case of an attractive shadow cast by an architectural element.

(19) (below) The Huntsville Times Building, 1928, Holmes Avenue. This Baroque-like cartouche contains classical elements such as floral swags and bundled reeds. It is made of the ancient ceramic material terra cotta ("cooked earth") that was revived and much-used in the latter 19th and early 20th century.





(19) The Huntsville Times Building, 1928, Holmes Avenue. This Baroque-like cartouche contains classical elements such as floral swags and bundled reeds. It is made of the ancient ceramic material terra cotta (“cooked earth”) that was revived and much-used in the latter 19th and early 20th



(21) The Huntsville Times Building, 1928. Four terra cotta eagles like this one guard the two entry arches. The Times Building was Huntsville’s first tall building, and used modified Gothic motifs in an Art Deco way to emphasize the building’s then-audacious twelve-story height.



(22) Pediment, old 1932-35 post office (now Federal Court-house) on Holmes Avenue. The anthemion-like element at the corner and the peak of the Pediment is called an acroterion. The proportions and decoration of this Beaux-Arts Classical entry are derived from ancient Greek antecedents.

(23) Greek Orthodox Church, University Drive, 1970's. In contrast to the modern idioms of the mural at the First Baptist Church, these contemporary icons are done to a strict set of stylistic rules laid down in medieval times and still used in Greek Orthodox Churches.





(24) First Baptist Church, 1960, Governors Drive. This ceramic-mosaic mural is probably Huntsville's largest example of architectural art. It is an ancient art form dating back to thousands of years before the time of Christ. This mural was planned as an integral part of the building.

(25) General Shale Brick Co. Office, Whitesburg Drive, 1980's. A carved-brick mural produced by gouging the soft unbaked bricks into the desired profiles, firing them, and laying them up like a conventional brick wall (more tricky than it sounds).



Harvie Jones is the quiet, professorial-looking good citizen people often see picking up litter on his daily treks home to lunch and back. One of Huntsville's most outstanding citizens, his work has brought Huntsville and himself national recognition. The City may dote on the recognition, but Harvie just keeps working, always looking for good architecture to save and restore for future generations.

Featured recently in Clem Labine's Traditional Building, May/June 1989, the magazine recognizes Harvie as "one of the South's leading preservation architects." His training at Georgia Institute of Technology was typical of architecture schools in the 1950's. Harvie was prepared, when he paired up with William Herrin in 1967, to design houses and buildings for Huntsville's space-age future. He and the firm have done plenty of that, the bulk of their business in fact. But as Huntsville expanded its population and spread its city limits, it left much of the older central city intact. This core soon had Harvie all wrapped up in its preservation.

The historical reconstruction of Constitution Hall Park followed by restoration of the Howard Weeden House inspired Harvie to learn every thing he

could about buildings and building techniques in the region's Federal period. These projects lead to others. Now Harvie can count "a library of over 5,000 annotated photographs of more than 200 historic structures," (Shouldn't we have an archives for those photographs?) but he has lost count of the structures he has looked at and advised about.

He has served numerous years on the Alabama Historical Commission and the AIA Committee on Historic Resources. Always happy to share his knowledge and enthusiasm for historic architecture, Harvie has helped produce five audio-visual programs on the subject.

What would he have us learn? "Harvie's approach to restoration is to leave as much original material as feasible, patching in only where necessary." He would stress that "old buildings teach us what wears well over time, both technically and esthetically." Aged bricks, for example, are patinated and look better than new. "Old buildings," he reminds us, "have many lessons to teach about human scale, warmth, and friendliness." Above all, Harvie stresses, "A building of any period, old or recent, deserves to keep its own character."