**Haunted into Being: barns in a mythic landscape**

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Preconceptions color things. Arguably, preconceptions and expectations define things more than objects’ physical characteristics do. If this seems hyperbole, think of “fashion” on the runways in Paris. It is almost never fashion in the sense of popular trend but instead is intentionally strange, expensive, and dysfunctional clothing perceived as fashion almost exclusively on the basis of who made it, where it is being shown, and what is said about it. Closer to the issue at hand, but parallel to the world of fashion, buildings that grace the covers of architecture journals are strange, expensive, and often poorly functioning but gain the moniker “architecture” by expectation or preordination despite performance. Fashion, in other words, has little relation to clothing. And as most cynics suspect, architecture is but a fairytale told about buildings.

Barns, particularly those concrete block rectangles with corrugated metal roofs common to old dairy farms in the southeast, would seem as out-of-place on the cover of architecture journals as in discussions of Paris and its runways. A type of counter-example, our peculiar habit of place leads us to set these practical structures aside as “real” or appreciate them as “authentic” – if we appreciate them at all – but not as “architecture.” This is unfortunate. Language here too intervenes, gets in the way, and prevents us from learning lessons about how architecture emerges.

Mississippi is a haunted place. It is special in this regard. Words and images here cling to objects natural and manmade, good and bad. Framed by the essays of Walker Percy and the folk-art constructions of Reverend Dennis and Earl Simmons, I explore the ways in which a pervasive building type is dismissed by preconception, by expectation, by language itself as a building and on rare occasions is haunted into architecture.

Keywords/phrases: barns, folk art, rural landscapes, language, Mississippi

“All knowledge is false,” according to Theodore Adorno.[[1]](#endnote-1) Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that all knowledge is fantasy or fiction about the world.

We will return to this.

The topic, as bracketed by the title or even as outlined in the abstract, could suggest middle age nostalgia or southern mysticism about a narrow and rather provincial concern. Barns? Except for avid PINTEREST bloggers and publishers of wall calendars, who cares? I don’t. Not exactly. Barns are invoked here as a foil for thinking about architecture generally. More precisely, barns support thinking about architecture in two modes: as fairly common sites of unexpected and deeply personal experiences that are usually solitary-bordering-on-solipsistic; and, as exemplars in the classificatory conundrum of what distinguishes mere buildings from architecture. The first is individual and matters at the level of family history or sensual theater. It is the realm of sounds, smells, and flickering light amalgamated in memory. The second is social and makes a difference in how we define, study, and potentially develop a discipline.

I was raised in southwest Mississippi, outside Brookhaven, in a landscape with more mid-century dairy barns than stop signs. These were, and the ones that remain are, simple structures of concrete floors, unpainted concrete block walls, and wood-framed, low-sloped, gabled roofs clad in corrugated metal (figures 1 and 2). It is fair to say these are not works of architecture according to any commonly accepted metric. And if one does include them, such structures tend to be measured by their distance from masterworks, situated at one end of a long qualitative spectrum that is populated at its other extreme by buildings like Piet Blom’s Cube Houses, built in Rotterdam in 1977 (figure 3), and Zaha Hadid’s MAXXI Museum of XXI Century Arts which opened in Rome in 2009 (figure 4), along with all the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier and other pantheon names. This orthodox end of the spectrum represents capital ‘A’ Architecture. The middle of the spectrum is filled with lower case architecture – those architect-designed, well-intentioned and often quite functional buildings that simply don’t have ‘it’. Barns, at the far end, are either castigated as bad architecture or mere buildings that don’t deserve the title architecture, even in all lower case letters (figure 5).

This spectrum is not a rhetorical or graphical device to emphasize the qualitative distance between dairy barns on the one hand and artifacts like the Cube Houses or the MAXXI on the other – between, in other words, buildings and architecture. The naïve or commonsensical view of the difference between the two is that works of architecture are just really good buildings – buildings that are better, at least in some ways, than other buildings. The “in some ways” part of that sentence is hard to detect when looking at the examples shown here. The Cube Houses are difficult to live in. The MAXXI was frighteningly expensive and functions poorly, containing far more circulation than exhibit space. You would also be hard pressed to find a local who loves the MAXXI. The buildings of Wright and Corbu leak and require frequent and often expensive maintenance. Dairy barns tend to be better buildings in terms of economics, functionality, and durability. In what way, then, is capital ‘A’ architecture better?

The great American writer Walker Percy deals with these sorts of messy differences in his book *The Message in the Bottle: how queer man is, how queer language is, and what one has to do with the other.* “Every conscious perception,” says Percy, “is of the nature of a recognition, a pairing, which is to say that the object is recognized as being what it is. … It is not enough to say that one is conscious *of* something; one is also conscious of something as being something.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The high fashion of Paris fashion week (figure 6) and its deviations from everyday clothing offers an example parallel to architecture and buildings. And it clarifies Percy’s remark.

Fashion is almost never fashion in the sense of a popular trend but instead is intentionally strange, expensive, and dysfunctional clothing perceived as fashion almost exclusively on the basis of who made it, where it is being shown, and what is said about it. Fashion is a classification, an interpretation, a system of representation perhaps, but it is not a thing in itself. To be “conscious of something as being something,” whether fashion or architecture, is consciousness of language, not of Being nor of matter.

Percy says, “the standard syntactical sentence of language, the coupling of subject and predicate, is a special case of the more fundamental human capacity to couple any two things at all and through the mirror of the one see the other.”[[3]](#endnote-3) It is difficult to see how inert matter is coupled to predicates like fashion or architecture, particularly in those rare moments of reverie when barns become sites of profound experience. So first let us turn to an analogous building type.

Folk art structures exist in another current that runs through the Deep South and, like barns, seldom merge in identity with Architecture. Unlike barns, folk art structures are always (always already) assumed to be more or other than mere buildings. Margaret’s Grocery, in Vicksburg, is one of the most famous in the folk-art world (figure 7). Begun in the 1980s by Reverend H.D. Dennis as an act of love for his wife and devotion to God, the grocery is at once shrine, church, and prayer tower (figure 8). These forms and the trinkets, images, and emblems attached everywhere already link to well-known narratives. In addition, Reverend Dennis placed signs all along the Highway 61 side of the grocery – literally adding language just in case the implied meaning isn’t clear (figure 9). All of this conceptual and narrative content haunts the material artifact. The building becomes a symbol or, in Percy’s description, “the vehicle for the conception of an object and as such … a distinctively human product.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Margaret’s Grocery is a rather overt example of this coupling of physical matter with immaterial meaning. In Bovina, Mississippi, a small town just outside Vicksburg, there is a far more difficult but arguably more compelling case (figure 10). Earl’s Art Shop, now under construction for the third time, resists description. Percy would have had trouble finding the words. Pictured here is the second version, which like its predecessor was still under construction when it was destroyed by fire in 2012 (figure 11). There was a singlewide manufactured home at the core, but it was hard to find. Envisioned as a home, gallery, studio, and juke joint, Earl’s Art shop was approximately 5000 square feet on numerous levels and mezzanines. The spaces interpenetrated in ways that rival Paul Rudolph and would have confounded Adolf Loos (figure 12).

Earl’s Art Shop was constructed of found materials. The individual elements were easy to identify even when juxtaposed – cast off lumber, reclaimed siding, commercial signage, window and doors from other buildings as well as from campers and trailers (figure 13). The whole, however, was something both difficult to name and yet clearly in the realm of a “distinctively human product,” to use Percy’s phrase. It was a symbol.

“The act of symbolization is to be conceived as a threshold beyond which new entities come into being, not by fiat, but precisely as they are enabled by the symbol.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This thing that comes into being isn’t exactly *there*, as manifest in a collage of materials. Earl’s Art Shop could be said to exist on or over the material world. In my preferred language, the folk-art masterpiece known as Earl’s Art Shop haunts the physical assemblage.

Places like Margaret’s Grocery and Earl’s Art Shop are interesting and instructive insofar as their materials, volumes, and even strong figures – bible quotes, Masonic symbols, Coke signs, school buses, trailers, cupolas and dormers – are all fairly commonplace to the Mississippi communities and rural landscapes in which each structure resides. In each case, the symbolic function of language alters perception. Neither building is simply what we see. In fact, extraordinary experiences of each are experiences primarily of things unseen. We tell stories about such places, stories of Reverend Dennis and stories about the kind of madness that drives Earl Simmons to build incessantly fire after fire; and the stories form our preconceptions and filter our sight. Fashion on the runways of Paris operates in the same way (figure 14). Art – whether architecture, folk art or fashion – is a preconception and symbolization triggered by, but not inherent in, materials. Art, in other words, is the successful haunting of reality by language.

Finally, it is possible to say something meaningful about dairy barns and the other innocuous buildings littering the Southern landscape that seldom make claims on our attention to be regarded as anything more. At the outset, I noted that dairy barns are instructive in two distinct modes – individual and collective. The raw functionality, the frequency in the landscape, and most importantly the lack of stories we tell about their origins or meanings or heroic builders leave us without knowledge by which to judge these artifacts as more than buildings. The collective stories we do tell about barns – romanticizations of the “mythic” southern landscape; praise in the vein of Sambo Mockbee, William Christenberry, James Agee and Walker Evans – render them as “authentic” or “real” or “pragmatic” but foreclose understanding and experience of these buildings as architecture. “The problem, of course, with any attempt to let the thing speak directly in its language,” according to Drucilla Cornell, “is that it is always blocked by the imposition of our language, our meaning.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Those powerful but usually solitary experiences, on the other hand, in which simple structures like barns envelope us in something we might describe as an architectural experience are not counterpoints to the argument above. Such moments of reverie or awe are not pre-linguistic or “true” experiences. They are simply moments when are our own stories and daydreams and fantasies color the world (figure 15). Novel patterns of light and dark and sound, or patterns we’ve learned to appreciate from TV and movies, combine with smells and textures that alter our sense of time by linking unconsciously to memories of other times or places or both. Our minds attempt to stabilize the moment, translating it as an “experience.”

It is doubtful that aliens descending to Earth for the first time would make a distinction between barns, folk art buildings, and great works of architecture. They probably wouldn’t observe a meaningful difference between everyday clothing and fashion either, barring perhaps that the former in both cases – barns and clothing – make a lot more sense functionally. And yet, we *see* differences. In Natchez, where this conference was originally to be held, grades of distinction are drawn everywhere. Even limiting the scope to physical structures, dualisms abound. Plantation houses and Slave quarters being most obvious. The problem with hierarchical dualisms is that they do not maintain the differences or dignities of both extremes.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hierarchical dualisms privilege privilege. The Cube Houses in Rotterdam, the MAXXI in Rome, and Antebellum Mansions are inevitably seen as signs of culture in a way that barns and other mere buildings are not.

All knowledge may not be false but it is reasonable to suggest that we study and evaluate our built environment incorrectly. Architecture is a story we tell about buildings. In capital ‘A’ architecture, the storylines are the intentions of the architect coded into the building or those propagated by media, often both. Whether we read the orthodox intentions or find our own, whether the building merits the moniker “architecture” or not, we still have architectural experiences. And these architectural experiences are still stories in which we immerse ourselves. “We cannot escape representational schemes”[[8]](#endnote-8) but we can come to recognize how much work the representational schemes are doing. If we were to shift our paradigm and see architecture as fiction, as a haunting of buildings, we could better see spirits everywhere.

1. Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia: reflections from damaged life,* translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London: New Left Books, 1974), 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: how queer man is, how queer language is, and what one has to do with the other,* (New York: Picador, 1975), 272-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 308. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 293. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit,* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. This argument is made convincingly on pages 54-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)