assemblage

A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture
Mack Scogin
Merrill Elam
Projects for Two Libraries

Clayton County Library, Jonesboro, Georgia, 1985–88

The project is a 33,000-square-foot administrative headquarters and main branch facility for a countywide library system. Set back from the road at the high end of a suburban sloping site, along a strip that runs between the Hartsfield International Airport and Tara, the mythical home of Scarlet, the library serves a population where, according to Scogin, “information is sought for practical reasons and history is personal.”

The building is organized around two major axes that serve to tie it to the site functionally and visually. The first draws patrons from the parking lot to the central circulation desk. Here the orientation shifts ninety degrees to the primary internal axis of the building. This orientation is toward views of the woods and the creek to the east of the site. The public areas of the building occupy a large open room oriented to these views, with a light monitor dividing the space, emphasizing the line of travel toward the genealogy collection. Shed roofs that spring to the east are also stepped up from the south to admit southern light and to vary the scale of the room, allowing the accommodation of appropriate functions at different heights. The structure is steel frame on a concrete foundation with long-span truss joints of wood and steel. The exterior skin combines metal siding of disparate textures and patterns.
2. Site plan

3. Plan view of site model

4. Plan

5. Plan with furnishings
6. North elevation

7-10. Views of north elevation

11. Sketches of north elevation
24. Transverse section at general reading room, looking south

25. Transverse section at reference services, looking south

26. Transverse section at browsing services, looking south

27. Transverse section through light monitor, looking south

28. Transverse section at children's services, looking south
The Buckhead Branch Library, Atlanta, Georgia, 1986–

The Buckhead Branch Library is a 20,000-square-foot neighborhood facility located in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta, an area that is currently undergoing a dramatic transition from a predominantly one-story storefront scale to a scale that is larger and more urban.

The site commands a spectacular view of downtown Atlanta from the high knoll that crests along its northern boundary at Buckhead Avenue. This is a pedestrian-scale street that contrasts sharply in character with Peachtree Road, a primary artery along the southern boundary of the site.

The new building is situated on the long, narrow portion of the T-shaped site, oriented along a north-south axis, to maximize exposure to these two street frontages and to take full advantage of the view of the city. Buckhead Avenue is retained as the “front door” for the new branch, with a system of canopies that extend to pedestrians approaching from the street as well as to the two parking lots to the east and west of the building.

1. View of model, front elevation, looking east
2. Plan study
3. Site plan
4. Plan view of site model
5. Conceptual plan sketch
6. Plan
7. Plan with furnishings
12. Light/shadow study

13. Longitudinal section, looking east

14. Longitudinal section, looking west

15. Transverse section at cone

16. Transverse section at children's area

17. Transverse section at reading room
26. Details of canopy, screen wall, and porte cochere.

27. Plan view of model showing entry canopy and porte cochere.

28. View of model at entry.

29. View of model at entry canopy, looking west.

30. View of model at entry canopy, from parking area.
Project Credits
Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam
Project director: Lloyd Bray
With Jeff Besode, Susan Deako,
Ellen Hooker, Parsons Martin, John
Lauer, Isabelle Miller, and Ron
Mitchell
Structural engineers: Huntington,
George and Davis, P.C.
Mechanical and electrical engineers:
Jones, Nall & Davis, Inc.
Lighting consultant: Foumann Lumi-
nance Design
Expected construction completion:
Summer 1989

J. W. Cullum
On Southern Identities
and Difference: Marginal
Notes for Mack Scogin
and Merrill Elam

Mack Scogin and Merrill Elam's collabo-
ration as architects might be called
less a conventional collaboration than an
ongoing, immensely productive creative
disagreement in which one or the other's
choices predominate at different moments.
In the Scogin, Elam and Bray description
of the two library projects published here,
the Clayton County Library is by "Mack
Elam with Mack Scogin" while the Buck-
hound Library is by "Mack Scogin with
Merrill Elam." Though Scogin and Elam
process distinctly different sensibilities,
their respective angles of vision are ulti-
mately convergent. The significant differ-
ences lie in details of personal style and
architectural subtleties: as in so many other
cultural situations, complex dynamics of
divergence and harmony spring from small
beginnings.

1. To be Southern is to be in many ways
already "decontexted," to grow up with an
acute awareness of plurality and differ-
ce in our sense almost by instinct an
ironic consciousness. None of this is in-
herent to all Southerners, of course, but
the facts of birth and geography do some-
times make for interesting and unex-
plored resonances with habits of mind
bred independently elsewhere. They
make for a sensitivity to "gaps," to the
unsaid, to what is not apparent. Or for a

concern with the ways in which surface
environment is anything but superficial,
with how the look of a place is bound up
with what is done there; with subtle social
codes (Wittgenstein's relation between
ethics and aesthetics).

The South — a society full of social and
racial paradoxes, a society lacking both
an economic center and a cultural capi-
tal, set in a region that long fitted the
ethnic model of a Third World coun-
try — breeds a distinct sort of artist and
intellectual, whose mind often responds
to rhythms born of different (albeit dis-
ordinarily so) cultural circumstances.
In this, the least postmodern of regions,
the facts of Southern biography may yield
an unexpected intuitive ground for grasp-
ing the many forms of postmodernism
from neoclassicism to deconstruc-
tionist paradigms. Repeatedly,
notions specific to the postmodern era
can be found in the Southern historical
experience (or "experiences," the details
differing according to one's place in the
shifting social order): the notion that
nothing possesses a center or else that
everything possesses a multiplicity of
semi-discrete centers (for example, the
sense in which institutions today function
as wells of power at which physical head-
quar ters are virtually fictional addresses
for real yet amorphous entities whose actions are spread over vast, indeterminate areas of the planet, or, on a philosophical level, the notion that every effort to define a single organizing center for any system fails simply because all systems are complex networks of interrelations, in which one idea prevails for enough of an entity to yield panoptical or iconic results.

The South, or "Souths" (these have always been many), is in the midst of disintegrated change. This is one reason why it is currently the meeting place of radical and reactionary polities tendencies. As well, in some respects (most notably through politically inclined television evangelism), the South has become an improbable media center from which lines of force radiate to the rest of the nation. Anticentral models of latter-day sociology might have expected this in a world where boundaries have ceased to matter except to those who happen to live within them, regional strategies are designed to grapple for influence (in the case of the 1988 "megaprimarys," the inorganic outcome of this effort delighted Southern liberals). Historically an aggregate of conflicting communities, the South is increasingly regarded as an abstract commodity by transnational investment consortiums. Fragile, impoverished Afro-Atlantic cultures are threatened by the potential commercialization of coastal lands, and while the poor have always been displaced, today's depression also uproots somewhat more affluent communities, and displaces the power relations of these communities that remain physically in place. The South changes in ways very familiar to the instinc strains of Southern consciousness: Southerners of all races have pronounced, along with the stubborn optimism that has appeared, at times, in their fiction and Nobel Prize

speeches, a skeptical positivism about human motivations.

The South, like regions everywhere with respect to hegemonic cultures, has been in apolitical about its strengths and about its weaknesses; it has also often been confused about which is which. "Regionalism," as Kenneth Frampton and Paul Ricoeur should have taught us long ago, need not be only an excuse for some stylistic failure. Real regional influences are something other than belligerent provincialism: artists or architects are drawn to certain styles, perhaps, for much the same reason that intellectuals are drawn to certain types of thought. Regional experience affects the way that one absorbs a larger tradition, which part of it one finds most useful, not the fact of absorption or use. Even vernacular craftsmanship, however rudimentary, styles whose origins can be traced to archaic Greece or Africa. We all live in a web of inheritance to which we react, and that inheritance is never confined within regional borders.

For all of that, there are clearly regional impulses (not necessarily styles) in art and in architecture. Environment is obviously not destiny; Robert Rauschenberg does not make tropical art in his north Florida studio. Physical distance from the center (or what masquerades as the center) does not preclude concern with issues of the center. It does, however, make possible a regional angle of vision, including what Frampton has called an architecture of resistance (to the totalizing imperatives of a unified culture). Mack Scogin has stated explicitly that though he is a Southern, he is not a Southern architect; but ways of judging and deciding can spring from a region without participating in some aggressive regional identification. All of the
issues I have raised here, together with the intuitive vocabulary intrinsic to Sco- gin and Elam's architecture, appear to be at stake in the library projects published here. They represent physical forms for a fast-changing mental and physical landscape.

2. The Clayton County and Buckhead Branch Libraries are two architectural types for the postmodern Southern city—constructions and deconstructions of old myths and new myths.

Jenks, south of Atlanta near Harts- field Airport, is the least, least transformation of an older South: its strip is as random as Robert Venturi's Vegas, but intimately, almost resistibly, regional. (There are still fewer mass-market malls than specialized gun shops, torn grocery stores, and empty little bait shops.) Jenksboro adorns Margaret Mitchell, who spent her summers there. The shopping strip is called Tara Boulevard, and businesses from beauty shops to realtors wear names like Twelve Oaks and Scarlett's. Apart from its small Confederate cemetery, the town bears no physical resemblance to anything in Mitchell's novel, much less to the grandiloquent Hollywood vi- sion of a mythologized Clayton County.

The Clayton County Library project speaks more to the town's physical and social reality than to the dreams of Tara. Set in the midst of rapidly developing, pleasantly random surroundings, it pre- sents symbolic permanence by exploiting the elements of transcendence in melancholic metal walls that resemble stone from a distance. It exploits the off-the- shelf building materials of the area to produce subtle effects of proportion, light, and shadow, thus suggesting what could be achieved by the builders of cheap apartments and storage sheds if they looked at their world a little differ- ently. The library may well be, as McNeil Elam put it, all that Jenksboro can afford of permanence in an era of its history not meant for weighty structures. The build- ing mirrors Jenksboro's lightness of being in very literal ways: its interior braces, far from being wall decorations, insure structural integrity for a building characterized throughout by a strikingly accomplished economy of means. In this as in other projects, Scogin and Elam delight in quoting the culture back to itself in ways meant to stretch its imagination.

The north Atlanta neighborhood of Buckhead is, supposedly, the exemplar of the new and newly multicultural South. Postmodernist buildings displace old structures along Peachtree Road, and their random presence reinforces the felt absence of any literal or metaphorical center: unlike the old-money mansions of nearby Paces Ferry, the new buildings are not set to the surrounding social order but to the dispersed centers of economic power. (These centers are, in significant measure, competing with or displacing the personal networks of social power for which "Buckhead" was once an implicit shorthand.)

The Buckhead Branch Library design, by contrast, tries to offer a creative response to the changing form of a traditionally fashionable neighborhood in which old webs of social relations are being relentlessly severed by late capitalism at its most spectacular. Oriented along the physical line of a ridge, on the site of the previous library, which had been built for less frenetic times, the new library forms a focal point of symbolic order that noth- ing else in the immediate environment begins to provide. At the same time, as Scogin has remarked in an interview, the buildings are present-centered as the Clayton County Library: both buildings respond functionally and symbolically to the way life is lived today in their respec- tive sections of north Buckhead (or proto- Buckhead) Atlanta. This necessarily includes the factor of change: the reticent elegance that Scogin has described as "politeness" seems designed to blend in with an environment that, by definition, will be substantially different within a very short time. (However, despite Sco- gin's assertion, the stylistic traits of the Buckhead library finally point less to present dilemmas than to a hoped-for future.)

It should go without saying (but perhaps does not) that there is nothing intrinsi- cally "Southern" about this ability to pro- vide symbolic centers for increasingly abstract spaces: these buildings respond to their environment by quoting a local vocabulary within an architectural system that is more international than it is re- gional. It may be the most appropriate response to the South's incipient post- modern situation. Part of Clayton County may still dream of a restored Tara (the county's voters recently rejected a pro- posal to build one as a tourist attraction), but the Jenksboro Library addresses the real condition of the county far better than the county's self-chosen literary vi- sions will ever do. Scogin has remarked that he and Elam typically begin a proj- ect by considering the client's personal symbols, it is a tribute to their own vision and also, perhaps, one of the larger, proper strands of Southern history that an architecture as deliberately attentive to the dimension of dreams should be, as well, so imaginatively attuned to the re- gion's problematic realities.