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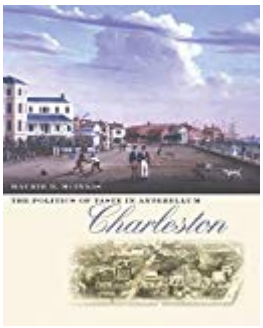
Maurie D. McInnis. *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. ix + 395 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2951-6.



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The elite of antebellum Charleston were confident and proud, using their homes and furnishings to announce their status; but they also knew their glory days were behind them. So shows Maurie McInnis in her persuasive and sumptuously illustrated account of the material lives of Charlestonians in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. While population in Northeastern cities mushroomed in the early nineteenth century, Charleston's grew at a modest pace. It is not surprising, then, that this Southern city was enamored with the past long before notions of the "Lost Cause" captured the Southern mind. As a political and intellectual center of proslavery, white Charlestonians also had good reason to emphasize the virtue of tradition when faced with the threats of abolitionism and slave revolt. McInnis' book does not merely explore the minds and materials lives of elite Charlestonians. One of the most valuable contributions of her book is her close analysis of the hidden backlots of elite homes where Charleston's enslaved residents worked and lived. McInnis is able to evoke how piazzas and pantries, drawing rooms and detached kitchens were all woven together into single, if somewhat segregated, homesteads. We see how spatial arrangements helped white and black residents negotiate close coexistence in a city where slavery faced greater challenges than on nearby Low Country plantations.

Citing the relative dearth of works on American art that look at how "art is appropriated for political ends," McInnis' stated aim is to explore the "intersection of American art and politics" (p. 12). She mostly succeeds in accomplishing this goal. Not surprisingly, her book succeeds best where the textual evidence is strongest. I am mindful of the fact that evidentiary standards are necessarily different for those who study material culture. Objects are loaded with cryptic meaning. The student of material culture has to be more willing to pry into objects without the guidance of the written word. Nonetheless, if those who create objects do not tell us why they created them (or what the objects came to mean to them after their creation), one still has to develop persuasive strategies to "read" these material forms.

McInnis is most persuasive as she explores the draw of the past on Charlestonians. As she de-

scribes the architecture of private homes and the rebuilding of St. Phillip's church, we see how elite residents paid homage to the late colonial period. Rich Charlestonians, whether or not they had claims to "aristocrat" status, copied or remodeled eighteenth-century homes. In the downtown, if building anew, young men of means tended to replicate the classical single house, a two-story home turned perpendicular to the street and fronted by piazzas on both floors. Those building in the newer northern Neck had more room to build and were more likely to copy the eighteenth-century plantation villas of the Low Country. Both forms evoked planter glory. So too did St. Phillips. McInnis takes great advantage of the public debate that erupted over the rebuilding of St. Phillips after it burned in 1835. Here, most clearly, we can see that Charlestonians were genuinely committed to creating a stable, hierarchical order through architecture. She quotes one writer who longed to be back in the "Church of my fathers" (p. 120). While some modifications were made to the design of the interior, the new St. Phillips was an incredibly faithful reproduction of the colonial structure. McInnis shows that these buildings paid homage not only to the colonial gentry, but also to the British gentry who continued to serve as a model to elite Charleston residents.

As McInnis looks at how Gothic forms made their way into backlots and into a seemingly random assortment of public buildings, her analysis falters. She seems to protest too much as she insists that the limited Gothic revival of Charleston was "not merely a random aesthetic statement" (p. 212). Random, perhaps not, but I am not persuaded that it carried all the meaning she imputes to it. McInnis protects herself on occasion by speaking merely of the "resonance" that certain structures had with their surroundings. Nonetheless, she also does suggest lines of connection and influence. Furthermore, can we really know if certain forms resonated with their audience if we do not see their reaction to their built environment? Ultimately, we need to know more about what Charlestonians thought about Gothic England, if we really are to believe that this form had an ideological dimension.

The contrast with her discussion of classical architecture is instructive. McInnis does an admirable job showing how elite Charlestonians were conversant in the classics. They were all too aware that Greeks and Romans held slaves; they admired their pro-slavery philosophy and correspondingly admired their architecture. While neo-Gothic forms perhaps could have conjured up images of an organic social order, as McInnis suggests, we do not see the same engagement between Charlestonians and medieval England as we do between them and the classical world. Nor can their adoption of neo-Gothic forms so easily be seen as homage paid to contemporaneous English gentry. Many English gentry continued to live in classical homes, so Charleston aristocrats could easily have ignored the Gothic revival without rejecting their English heritage.

I might suggest an alternative reading of these structures. It seems that certain buildings mattered more to elite Charletonians than others. Those at the cultural periphery were perhaps more liable to the winds of architectural change. While private mansions and St. Phillips were symbolically vital, communicating the endurance of the Charleston aristocracy, few elite would have worried terribly about the message conveyed by outbuildings and prisons. Here, national and international influences were more likely to be felt. The builders of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and many other northern prisons chose castle-like exteriors, just as the architects of the Work House and District Jail in Charleston did.[1] Yes, the exterior of Charleston penal institutions could have taken on different meanings in their Southern context, but there simply is not sufficient evidence to show what meaning they held. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that the

Gothic stylings of William Aiken's outbuildings expressed anything in particular about slavery.

That said, McInnis does an admirable job exploring how Aiken's backlot shaped the lives of his slaves. As she explores the efforts of slaveholders to channel interactions between slaves with walled-in windows and walls, she illuminates the difficulties of slaveholding in Charleston. She also shows some of the compromises that evolved between slaves and masters, as sumptuary laws were often left unenforced. Thus, her work is a valuable contribution to a recently burgeoning literature that shows the unique challenges of slaveholding in urban environments.[2]

This contribution, coupled with her convincing portrait of a Charleston elite enamored with their glory days, makes her book a valuable contribution for scholars and for Charleston visitors. Even if only a fraction of the nearly four million tourists who visit that town today pick up her book, public history in Charleston will be much richer because of her efforts.

Notes

[1]. Norman Johnston, ***Eastern State Penitentiary: Crucible of Good Intentions*** (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994).

[2]. See, for example, Jill Lepore, ***New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan*** (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2005); Leslie M. Harris, ***In the Shadow of Slavery: African-Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Douglas Egerton, ***Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802*** (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Douglas Egerton, ***He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*** (Madison: Madison House, 1999); and Edward A. Pearson, ***Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

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