

Monuments, Memorials, Landmarks, and Symbols: Conflicting Values in the American Narrative

GORHAM BIRD

Auburn University

MARK ALAN BLUMBERG

Auburn University

MARY ENGLISH

Auburn University

JENNIFER PINDYCK

Auburn University

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“To fuse objects and space with the past, a cultural backdrop must be in place to serve as a structure for juxtaposition. This does not mean that we simply mix together the old and new, but carefully commingle past and present through formal gestures and narrative.”

—Walter Hood, *Sites of Memory: Perspectives on Architecture and Race*¹

MEMORIAL OVER MONUMENT

It is important for students to confront sites that provoke critical discussions around ownership, politics, race, history, and basic human rights. Students explored the intersections of history, symbolism, form, and design within the context of a former site of enslavement registered as a national historic place². An organization which provides individuals over the age of 50 with opportunities for community and learning is interested in expanding their facilities on their existing site. The program, although client conceived, was the subject of a discussion with the students as to what programmatic characteristics are appropriate for this site.

The problem is rife with dichotomies: its horrific past and landmarked status, and the question of how to approach the memorializing of this place. The recognizable image of the architecture is what makes it both a valued historic place yet also a painful reminder of oppression.

The framing of the design problem was formed through historical analysis of the 1700-acre Sunny Slope site (Figure 1) as a site of enslavement of men, women, and children. Students analyzed the existing site to understand how formal strategies were used to establish power over the landscape through central axes and

visual hierarchies³. The complex reality of the historical context requires thoughtful consideration. As Zumthor expresses in *Thinking Architecture*, the projects would need to dialogue in a meaningful way with the existing architecture and landscape, “for if the intervention is to find its place, it must make us see what already exists in a new light.”⁴.

CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES

When designing the expansion to the site, students developed a range of formal dialogues with the existing Greek-revival architecture, deciding whether to preserve or interrupt the established hierarchy (Figure 2). Although many students tested the idea of demolition or moving off site, ultimately the decision was to not erase the history from the site as “erasure allows people to forget”⁵ but to find a way to remember it in a new context.

In response to the historic power the architecture held over the landscape, most students chose to challenge the formal axis and view, understood as representing and perpetuating ideas of a social and racial hierarchy (Figure 3). Other students sought to connect more directly to how the enslaved worked the land, advocating that the landscape embodies the lives of forced labor on the site. The public space and view around the existing house are maintained but augmented and/or reprogrammed as a contemplative space for public use (Figure 4). Students embraced the concept that their act of making needed “to enshrine the knowledge of the cultural past for the sake of future generations.”⁶ This played out in diverse ways, some of which consisted of less formal/hierarchical experiences and more personal/individual experiences. Designs included long views, multiple ways to navigate, interstitial spaces to slow and quiet architecture rather than one that constantly communicates to the visitor.

One project (Figure 5) places bent bars as part of a gesture on the site, stretching over the site and requiring visitors to walk across the yard. The geometry of the bars implies new centralities, and



Figure 1. When designing the expansion to the site, students created dialogues with the existing Greek-revival architecture (left), deciding whether to preserve or interrupt the historical procession or the houses' hierarchy over the site. The Historical analysis drawing (right) speculates on the extents of the 1700 acre Sunny Slope Plantation with orange squares representing the land area required of the 65 enslaved men, women and children. Image credit Gorham Bird.

the resultant exterior room attenuates views across the site and beyond the existing house (Figure 6). Views across the central exterior space provide opportunity for reflection. The bars contrast with the existing house with respect to the materials (blackened wood) and length but are similar in roof form and height. The circulation through the site as designed provokes a circuitous path through the facility encouraging visitors to slow down and socialize with other.

In Figure 7, a circular pavilion interrupts the view of the existing house and the direct access from the main street. The circular pavilion replaces the axis with a new center, from which emanates a memorial to the former enslaved people of this site, a constant reminder of the history of the site now at its center. Organizing the site with a circular memorial pavilion was a clear and bold approach. More subtle iterations (Figure 8) created new stories built around revealing the enslaved person's relationship to the landscape. The existing barn was salvaged and relocated to create a central courtyard setting up a diagonal relationship with the existing house. This position creates a new axis, and defines a series of exterior rooms, which becomes part of an entry sequence to the rear door, now the main entrance, of the existing house.

Another approach to the project included investigating the vernacular of the southern porch typology. Historically, the Sunny Slope porch was used as an elevated stage for political rallies held in the front lawn in support of secession⁷. As shown in Figure 9, redefining the porch's role socially became the conceptual basis of the project. Here, the expansion includes a lecture hall that aligns to and is directed toward the porch of Sunny Slope, where the lecture hall can open for events, creating a new exterior space (Figure 10). The space in-between becomes a public space around a new discourse of reconciliation, wherein discussion from the educational facility can be extended outward, in the place once used to perpetuate ideas of white supremacy.

CONCLUSION

Necessitated by the negotiation between its former history and its future of learning, students found that the act of memorialization did not need to create objects within the landscape but weave the essential buildings and landscape elements into a new scape, one that is informed by the history of the site. While the antebellum house offers a marking of a particular style of architecture, its preservation also mandates an acknowledgement of a history that cannot be forgotten. While the design concepts were grounded in a formal strategy, students discovered that

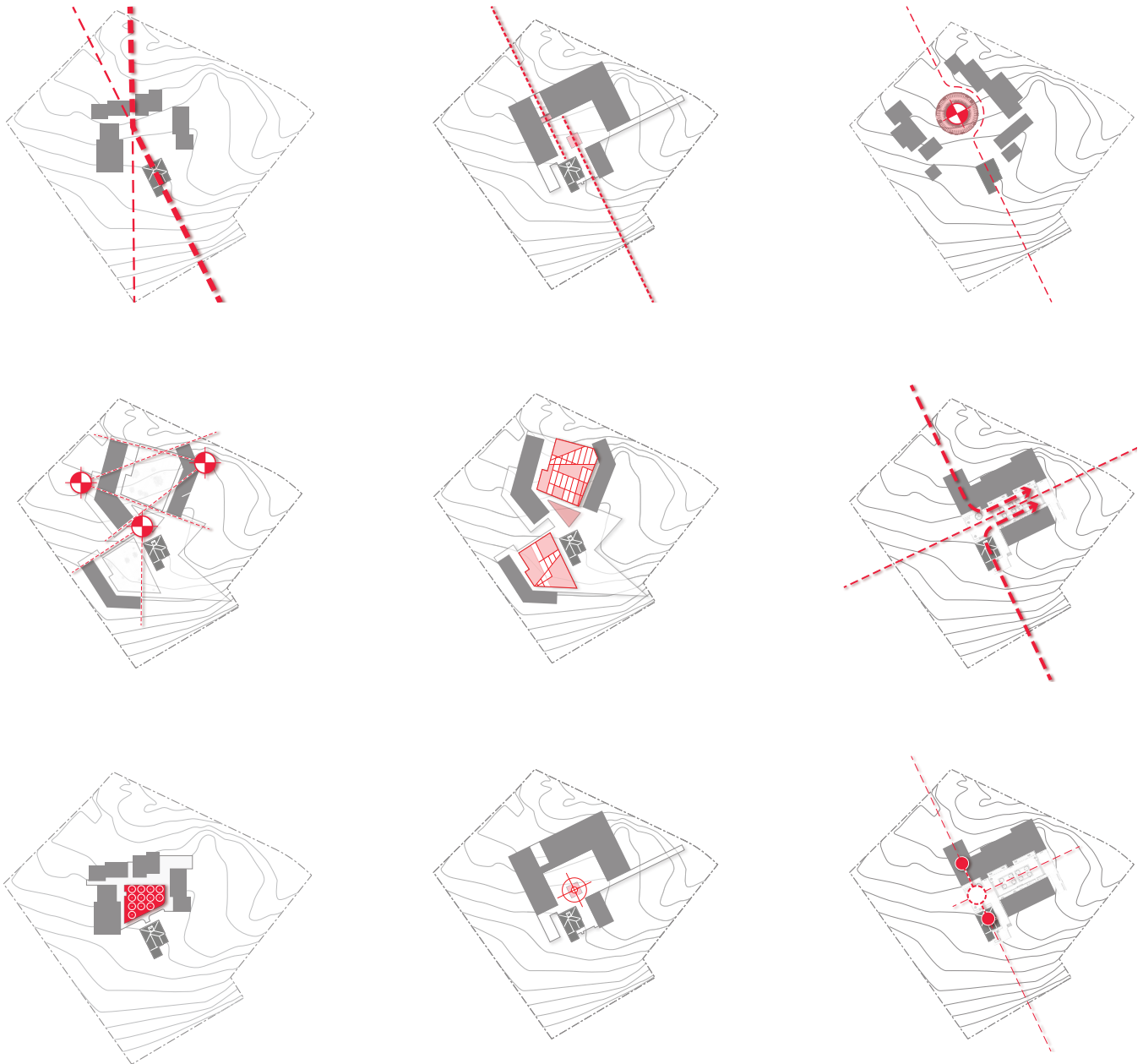


Figure 2. Diagrams of a range of student projects showing the different architectural responses to the Sunny Slope House. Most students chose to challenge the formal axis and view, understood as representing and perpetuating ideas of a social and racial hierarchy. Other students sought to connect more directly to how the enslaved worked the land, advocating that the landscape embodies the lives of forced labor on the site. The public space and view around the existing house are maintained but augmented and/or reprogrammed as a contemplative public spaces. Image credit Mark Alan Blumberg.

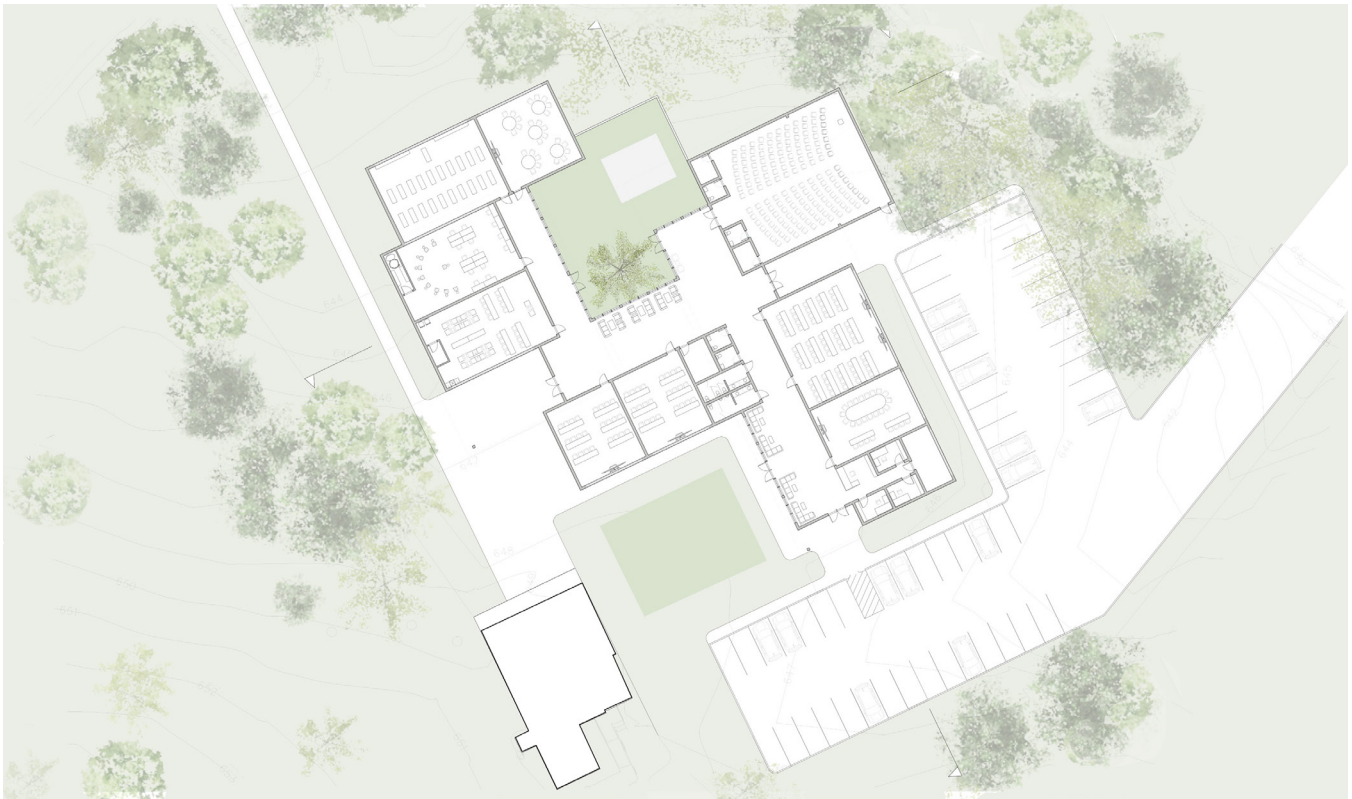


Figure 3. This project positions the expanded program along the visual axis of the Sunny Slope house, intending to interrupt the current view to provide a new public face and exterior spaces for the adult education facility. Image credit Hannah Mierzwa.



Figure 4. Plan of planted courtyard project. Image credit Lawson Faulk.



Figure 5. Bent bars plan. Image credit Anna Leach.



Figure 6. Bent bars define exterior rooms with long views of the landscape and Sunny Slope house. Image credit Anna Leach.



Figure 7. A pure geometry is inserted within the landscape to create a memorial to the enslaved of the site, to redefine one's relationship to the landscape and existing house. Image credit Denae Iniss.

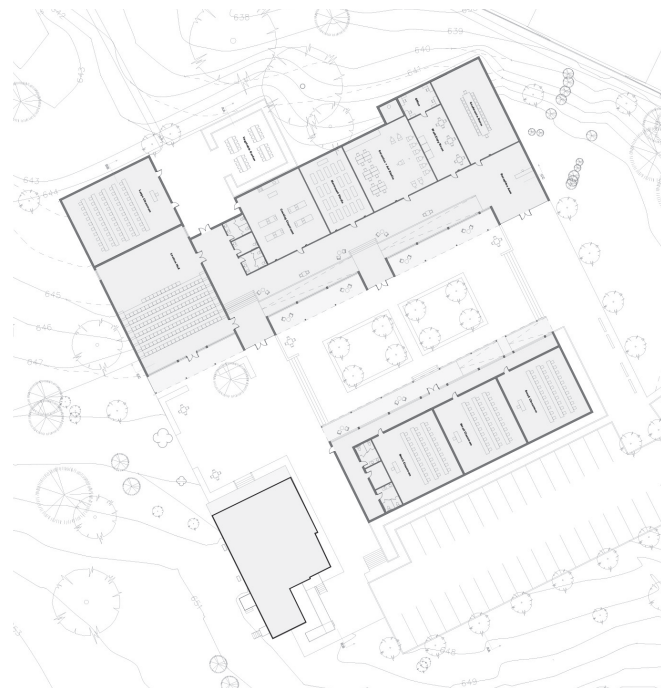


Figure 9. Porch typology project siteplan. Image credit Shanna Fortier.



Figure 8. This project has relocated the barn to create a new center which all new program surrounds. Image credit Claire Hardin.



Figure 10. Porch typology project showing a new lecture hall in alignment with the historic Sunny Slope porch, which creates a new public space with additional porches intended for discourse and reconciliation. Image credit Shanna Fortier.

the arranged program on the site provided opportunities for users to socialize in new ways, engage with the landscape, and reflect on the site's history of enslavement. Students understood that although strong concepts were required from the onset, they could only offer imperfect solutions. The faculty discussed whether this context was too complex for a second-year undergraduate studio but concluded that to ignore the context would be to condone forgetting. Moving forward, the studio aims to place this project within conversations around race and architecture while engaging more dialogue with the pain of the site.

ENDNOTES

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2. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, "Sunny Slope, Lee County, Alabama", United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, February 26, 2009.
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4. Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Germany: Birkhäuser Architecture; 3rd edition, 2010), 26.
5. Walter Hood, "Introduction," in *Black Landscapes Matter*, ed. Walter Hood and Grace Michell Tada (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2021), 1-8.
6. Susanne Kuchler, "Place of Memory", in *The Art of Forgetting (Materializing Culture)*, ed. by Adrian Forty and Susanne Kuchler (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), 37.
7. Danielle Funderburk, Lauren Mata, Michael Megelsh, Jordan Miles, Matthew Robinson, and Victoria Skelton, "Sunny Slope Historical Resources Report" (graduate studies report, Auburn University, 2018), 1-14.