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Greenville's Brutalist Movement
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Greenville's Brutalist Moment refers to the years between about 1960 and 1975, when Greenville's architects took the lead in moving South Carolina's architectural trends in a progressive direction.

They did so by producing a large number of exceptional structures in the style that has come to be recognized as Brutalism. While many of these works were for sites in Greenville itself, others were built elsewhere in South Carolina. So numerous were these examples of Greenville Brutalism that I have started to think of Greenville as a rich woman with so many diamonds, her husband would likely not even notice should she lose one.

In Greenville, as across America, the leading architects of the 1950s adopted as values the same principles Reynor Banham adduced to define the New Brutalism: (1) that it was memorable as an image; (2) that it clearly exhibited its structure; and (3) that it used materials "as found." By the next decade, Greenville architect Jack Freeman landed the commission for a group of dormitories at Clemson College. He designed them as extremely simple structures built of concrete, brick, and glass. Their concrete elements are textured in the manner of *beton brut*. They respect symmetry even more consistently than Harlan McClure's Architecture Department building did in the 1950s. These dormitories unquestionably qualify as Brutalist, and their creation marks the beginning of Greenville's ascent to the topmost place in South Carolina's building world.

Greenville's leading architects of the early 1960s heartily embraced the display of structure. Rather than virtuosity, however, they concentrated on simplicity. In the Berea High School, J. E. Sirrine Co. demonstrated how an inexpensive structural solution of the mid-1950s, the precast concrete double-tee beam, could be used to striking architectural effect. A 1963 commercial building on Wade Hampton Boulevard adopted Berea High School's use of precast double-tees as a roof structure. Irregular in plan, the building proclaims an inconvenient truth that the school only whispers: to wit, that architecture can arise not only in a vale of beauty, surrounded by lakes and lawns and oak trees, but just as gloriously in the realm of the ugly and ordinary, surrounded by asphalt parking lots, signage, and suburbia. Because it is makes so radical a statement with the utmost clarity, this building provides the most revealing piece of evidence of the drift of Greenville taste that within a year or so of its construction in 1963 would infect both of the city's most elite tastemakers (Charles Daniel

and Roger Peace) and thereby open the way for the triumph of upstate Carolina Brutalism.

It is of special significance for revealing that Greenville architects by 1963 had taken notice (through publications) of the work of Paul Rudolph, a Florida architect who would transfer to New England at the end of the 1950s and there become the acknowledged leader of American Brutalism.

In the early 1960s, under the influence of Le Corbusier, Boston emerged as the epicenter of American Brutalism. Also practicing in Boston was a long established firm that, in the 1940s, had become directly connected both with the roots of Europe's New Brutalism and the emerging Carolinian Brutalism of Greenville. In 1948 this firm -- Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean -- associated with Finnish architect Alvar Aalto on the design of a new dormitory for MIT. In the resulting aformal structure that snaked alongside the Charles River, the American tradition of brick construction impressed Aalto. His subsequent transfer of that tradition to Finland can be credited with stimulating the taste for simple brick buildings that exemplified Hans Asplund's "*nybrutalism*.'

After designing the new campus of Furman University, Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean served Greenville again as the master planners of the Civic Center proposed to occupy Furman's former campus near downtown. Their civic center layout at first glance appears to have much in common with that of New York's Lincoln Center. However, the plan, in fact, closely relates to the firm's contemporary design for a Fine Arts Center in Minnesota. In this project the four main buildings are aformally disposed around a covered central space. The buildings themselves, of brick and exposed concrete, have an affinity with work by Kahn as well as Le Corbusier. By transatlantic standards they are frankly Brutalist structures.

After long delays, starting in 1965, Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean would design the Greenville County Library they had earlier located on their master plan. Their design for this building was also Brutalist in every respect. In fact, it counts as Greenville's textbook example of the New Brutalism. The use of brick traces back to the foundation of the Scandinavian brick Modernism that inspired the original concept of the New Brutalism. The formality if the library's plan recalls the Palladian component of early British New Brutalism. Finally, its overall design and its use of concrete reference the Brutalism of Le Corbusier and his followers in New England. The library's plan is centered on a multi-story open space and is unmistakably the topological deformation of one of Rudolf Wittkower's diagrams of Palladian plans. The exterior of the library adheres to Le Corbusier's Five Points as closely as does the master architect's own Carpenter Center at Harvard.

A 1965 conceptual drawing for the Greenville County Library at Heritage Green. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

The library's purpose is eminently democratic – the support of literacy, and its commitment to the leveling effect of democracy is evident in its horizontality. Some of its fenestration derives directly from the window pattern of the most Corbusian building in Greater Boston short of the one by Le Corbusier himself, the Holyoke Center at Harvard by Sert, Jackson & Associate.

In 1964, Greenville hosted a regional meeting of the American Institute of Architects at which Ulrich Franzen, one of the most notable of the emerging New England Brutalists, gave the keynote address. To architects, a keynote address normally means a slideshow. Franzen's slideshow in Greenville reportedly emphasized his recent residential work, of which the very latest design at the time would have been his waterside Castle House in New London. Franzen's presentation, and perhaps especially his Castle House project, appear to have made strong impressions on Greenville's architects and turned their understanding of Brutalism to one emphasizing formalism and monumentality.

The initial manifestation of this new understanding came with the creation of the Greenville Little Theatre. The design of this building reflects the collaboration of Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean of Boston with the Greenville firm of Craig & Gaulden. As finished and as usually credited, it reflects preponderantly the role of the latter. It therefore counts as Greenville's first important homegrown example of the dominant phase of American Brutalism.

The newly built Greenville Little Theatre in 1970 displays characteristics of the Brutalist style with a local flare. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

The theater is roofed with precast concrete double-tee beams, in a manner Craig & Gaulden no doubt learned from Sirrine's Berea High School. At the Greenville Little Theatre these beams are carried on double supports, also concrete, each in the shape of an inverted U. In the design of these supports, Craig & Gaulden appear to have been inspired by Paul Rudolph's Sarasota Senior High School. The main front self-evidently displays the topological deformation of Leonbattista Alberti's unexecuted scheme for the Church of San Andrea, which was the subject of one of the most acclaimed diagrams in Rudolf Wittkower's famous book. Yet at the same time, this same façade appears to present a variation on another diagram in that book: a diagrammed Palladian floor plan turned to use as an elevation. Craig & Gaulden were here indulging in a high-order exploration of form, above and beyond any exploration they carried on of theater function. That exploration avoided direct copying just as it avoided direct quotation, but instead aimed at synthesis.

Craig & Gaulden's next important commission was for a warehouse and office building next to the Greenville Downtown Airport for Crosrol Carding Developments, a British firm that established itself in Greenville in the first wave of heavy European investment in the upstate economy. Crosrol's British management may well have been familiar enough with Brutalism to have had a keen understanding of the Brutalist exercise with which their Greenville architects supplied them. The design appears to have been directly inspired by Franzen's Castle House, thus to belong to the culture of New England which was, historically, the link between the British and Carolinian textile industries. The plan of the office area is Palladian. The overall plan, based on two juxtaposed squares, suggests work by the late eighteenth-century English architect, Robert Morris. Eighteenth-century English architecture is even more strongly suggested by the front elevation, though of course it has been topologically deformed almost to the point beyond which recognition would have been impossible. The basic scheme of the elevation appears to have been generated by the same formal exploration that resulted in the façade of the Little Theatre. In its insistent verticality the façade reproduces one of the salient features of eighteenth-century English Neo-Palladianism, including in its pale reflections found in British colonial outposts such as South Carolina. Further emphasizing the impression of eighteenth-century English architecture conveyed by the brick and concrete Crosrol building, is the sharawaggi landscaping that fills its hypethral center.

Crosrol, Inc.'s building as it appeared in 1991. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

The problematics and possibilities of precast concrete intrigued not only Greenville's advanced architects of the early 1960s, but also some of the greatest talents of the time working worldwide in architecture and engineering. They included Marcel Breuer, who explored how precast concrete elements could be assembled into curtain walls, and members of the New York office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. SOM's experimental design for the Banque Lambert in Brussels, with its tapering steel-capped columns beneath a superstructure of self-supporting precast elements, led directly to the same firm's equally Brutalist design for the Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport.

Of all the Greenvillians alive in the early 1960s, Charles Daniel had the most extensive understanding of concrete as a building material whose full potential still lay in the future. Precisely for that reason he understood why it was second to none as a symbol of progress. He also understood the challenges architects must face in making concrete attractive to a South Carolina public who mostly experienced concrete as a material used not for serious works of architecture but for utilitarian bridges and factories. He understood those challenges because he was both an architectural patron of stature and a builder of concrete factories.

Shown here in 1969, the Daniel Building towers above N. Main Street and was the tallest building in South Carolina at the time it was built. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

Daniel conceived the Daniel Building as meeting three interconnected goals. First, it would advertise his Daniel Construction Company as a firm of regional consequence with national and even international aspirations, capable of major urban work. Second, it would constitute a material contribution to a new phase of southern history, one fulfilling the promise of the New South after the hiatus of the New Deal. Third, it would anchor the revitalization of downtown Greenville and launch the city as a serious rival of Atlanta for dominance in the emerging historical phase that Daniel called the Better South.

In planning for his new building Daniel aimed to exceed, or at least ballpark, the height statistics of the several skyscrapers erected in downtown Atlanta in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His envy seems to have fallen especially on the newest contribution to Atlanta's skyline, still under construction in 1964: the First Federal Savings and Loan Building. Its Brutalist style provided Daniel with a literally concrete example of what a progressive southern skyscraper should – or must – look like. It would look like the most progressive buildings of New England, the region from which Daniel in the early 1960s was actively recruiting investors in the South Carolina heartland of his Better South. However, unlike those Brutalist buildings which were mostly devoted to civic purposes conceptually underpinning the Federal government's nascent Great Society program, First Federal in Atlanta was a commercial structure.

As did the slightly earlier Bank for Savings in Birmingham, where Daniel Construction Company maintained its oldest branch office, Atlanta's First Federal featured a separate elevator tower. This arrangement maximized the clear space available for rental on every typical floor of a tall office building. Daniel adopted the arrangement for his tower in Greenville. To design his tower Daniel hired Atlanta architects, Stevens & Wilkinson, whose mid-rise work for Georgia Baptist Hospital had probably brought the company to his attention. The Daniel Building was their first high-rise job.

In designing the Daniel Building, Stevens & Wilkins aestheticized the Brutalism from which Atlanta's First Federal had already extracted all social content by commercializing it. Daniel would get a highly textured concrete building, unmistakable as a piece of progressive Brutalism, but its Brutalism would be only skin deep; and its skin, hung as a curtain wall over a steel frame, would feature vast amounts of prestigious marble. To diffuse the formalism seen in the marble of the curtain wall, Stevens & Wilkinson emphasized aformality in the Daniel Building's elevations. Like the Greenville Little Theatre, the building exhibits asymmetry in its lateral walls but symmetry on its main front: 'Modern' as well as 'conservative' faces. But by dividing the main façade into four bays the architects deprived it of the central focus that traditional classicism requires. Thus, Modernism tempered even the most traditional aspects of the Daniel Building.

As the Daniel Building was under way, the Greenville *News-Piedmont* announced plans for another Brutalist addition to downtown Greenville. This structure did not stand free, as all other examples of Brutalism in Greenville did, but rather as an annex attached to an existing complex that had grown by accretion since 1914. This annex, like the original building on the site, was designed by the J. E. Sirrine Company. Construction went along in phases, obliterating tracks of Greenville's New South and New Deal eras as it proceeded.

The Greenville-Piedmont News building's modern new office building in 1968 stands in contrast to the original (early 1900s) office building next to it on the corner. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

Sirrine's original project of 1965 called for a 22-story tower on a 3-story podium. Had the tower been completed it would have nearly matched the height of the Daniel Building formally as well as ideally. The two structures would have effectively book-ended the historic but declining shopping section of Greenville's Main Street. But only the podium was ever completed. This podium provided the *News-Piedmont* with a dignified Main Street frontispiece, effectively a three-dimensional sign --the conceptual equivalent of Robert Venturi's famous 'Bill-Ding-Board' project of 1967. Above all, this cutting-edge piece of full-frontal architecture was a sign of progress.

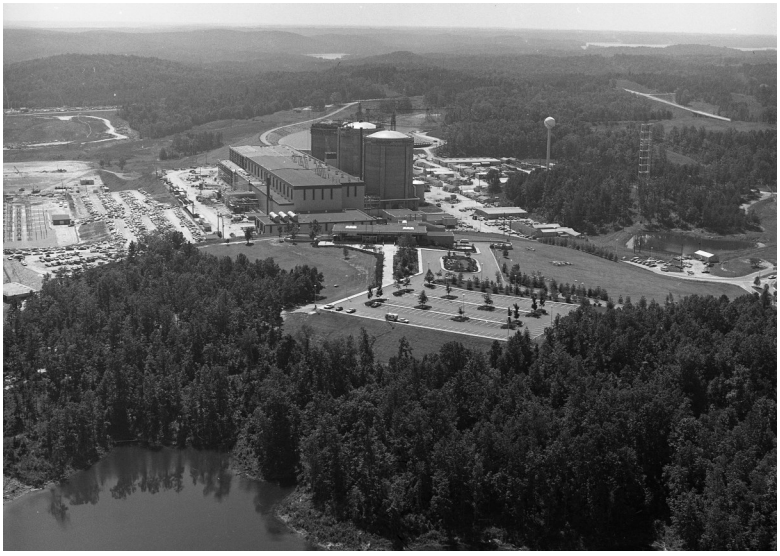
At the building's dedication in spring 1967, the Greenvillians in attendance literally turned their backs on Greenville's past in order fully to appreciate the vision of the city's future that their newspapers of record had placed permanently before them. If that vision looked startling, it was because the future it projected would be brighter than any circumstances Greenville had ever seen before. To make its optimistic point, the building merged two potent images of Brutalism's recent achievements: Breuer's implementation of curtain walls assembled from precast concrete panels (the first example of which had been built in France) and SOM's eye-catching but empirically justified steel-capped piers used first in the Banque Lambert in Brussels. Hence the Greenville News -Piedmont building possessed the cachet of international up-to-dateness – something which might prove useful to the efforts led by Charles Daniel to attract European manufacturers to the Greenville area.

Like the Daniel Building, the Greenville News-Piedmont Building utilized both concrete and natural stone for its exterior expression. It also made a conspicuous use of bronze. Its Brutalism was, hence, sensuous and highly aestheticized. Aestheticization, however, left intact the fundamental connotation of Brutalism: honesty. Here, all the materials were indeed used honestly, 'as found'. The structural system was plain to see. Even the curtain wall was honestly expressed as the non-bearing element it was since it stopped well short of the building's substructure. Honesty, of course, is a crucial value for a newspaper to embrace.

But savings banks and construction companies and all successful businesses must also be operated on a basis of honest dealings. The projection of honesty had therefore been an important factor in deciding the choice of Brutalism not just for Greenville's Roger Peace but also for Charles Daniel and the principals of Atlanta's First Federal – who were actively building that "Better South" Daniel expected. Brutalist buildings helped Greenville establish itself as a place where citizens and newcomers alike could expect fair treatment from its businesses, where straightforwardness was valued, and thrift respected.

In the same year, 1966, a competition to design a municipal building at the Civic Center then rising on the old Furman campus brought plentiful evidence that Greenville's leading architects saw Brutalism only in terms of a 'look' with which Greenville's progressivism could be architecturally publicized. None of the competing projects was executed but their aesthetics and emphasize on precast concrete re-appeared in a number of subsequent projects by Greenville architects, including an Engineering Research building at Clemson University. There the up-to-date Brutalism of the exterior served as visible proof of the advanced equipment inside.

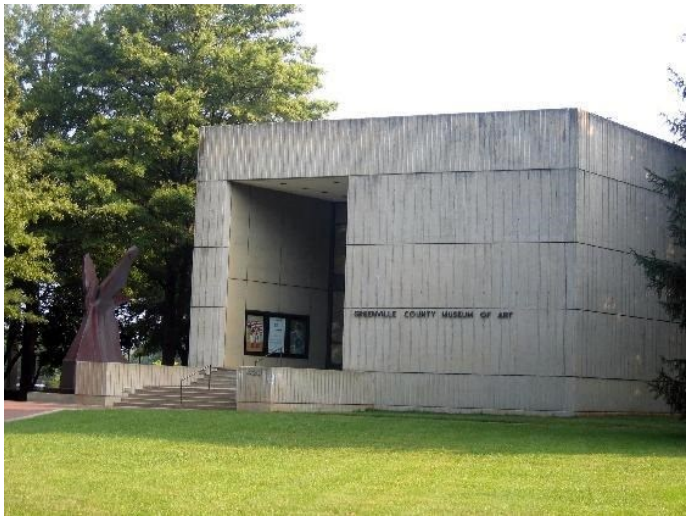
In the Duke Power Visitors' Center at the Keowee-Toxaway nuclear power station Freeman, Wells & Major of Greenville produced one of South Carolina's finest examples of a late and fully aestheticized Brutalism. The Brutalism here was also the most fully charged with ideology, since the building was required to function as public relations tactic. The design called for a pavilion that appeared symmetrical on approach, but from which various appendages sprawled.



Duke Energy's complex at Keowee-Toxaway in 1971. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

Inside, at one end of the temple-like main room, a skylighted stairwell led downward into a crypt. The religious overtones are strong in this building intended to inculcate belief in that most futuristic of all power sources, nuclear energy. Formalism is everywhere in evidence, but nowhere more so than in the integration of the mechanical and structural systems (in a way that Paul Rudolph advocated in the late 1950s). The resulting orderliness reinforces the sense of a sacred space. The exposed aggregate concrete reveals the elaborate care the architects took to assure an attractive finish. This concrete is anything but *beton brut*.

Aestheticized Brutalism reached its apogee in South Carolina with Craig & Gaulden's creation of the Greenville County Museum of Art on the site originally intended in the Civic Center for a Municipal Building. Like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum, it was a work of art built to contain works of art. That it would be Brutalist was all but pre-ordained by such precedents as I. M. Pei's Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York. Like the Everson, Greenville's Museum would also be concrete and sculpturesque.



The Greenville County Museum of Art in 1985. *(Photo courtesy of the Greenville County Historical Society.)*

The Greenville Museum stands between the Little Theatre and the County Library. With a roughly triangular footprint it intrudes violently upon the public space intended by Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean, destroys the integrity of its simple shape, and thereby dynamizes it. Its floor plans are composed of parallelograms and trapezoids. Symmetry is all but banished from the interior and the exterior alike. The appearance of aformality rules every aspect of the composition, but the very fact that Craig & Gaulden so carefully composed this building proves that it, too, belongs to the formalist phase of Brutalism in South Carolina.

The interior opens up vertically and horizontally in a variety of diagonal vistas, none of which can be appreciated as axial. The appearance of aformality rules every aspect of the composition, as formalism only a few years earlier had ruled every aspect of Craig & Gaulden's Crosrol building. The very fact that Craig & Gaulden composed this museum just as carefully as they had the Crosrol structure, proves that the museum, too, belongs to the formalist phase of Brutalism in South Carolina. Its aformality is, in effect, a formalist mannerism.

As if to guarantee the legitimacy of its own Brutalism, the museum features quotations – all deformed, of course -- from three famous Brutalist buildings. One recognizes the triangular staircases from Louis Kahn's Yale Art Museum; the oversized downspout from Le Corbusier's church at Ronchamp (previously quoted at Keowee-Toxaway); and the exposed plumbing of the Smithsons' Hunstanton School (which in Greenville appears as a roof drain visible through the skylight over the light well at the entrance). As the 1970s wore on, architectural quotation would be fetishized by one of America's leading Postmodern architects, Philip Johnson. The extent of its practice in the Greenville Museum suggests that the building is not just a terminal piece of Modernism but also a precocious predictor of what would soon replace it.

The Greenville Museum uses concrete with the traces of its formwork left exposed. Superficially the reference is to Le Corbusier's use of *beton brut*, but because the formwork itself was so carefully constructed so as to leave a particular pattern in the final product, it is more closely related to the way Kahn used concrete at Yale. The striated pattern in the walls, both inside and outside, is echoed by the pattern formed by the stems of the tee beams used to construct the museum's floors. The pattern suggests corduroy, a textile, and therefore the textile industry that accounted for a large share of upstate South Carolina's economy in the second half of the twentieth century. The use of tee beams in a museum aestheticizes what was originally, and most often, used for industrial buildings. What for the Smithson's was a warehouse aesthetic desired for ethical reasons, now becomes a warehouse aesthetic that serves purely aesthetic ends. Just as Marcel Duchamp had used Ready-Mades to disrupt the early twentieth-century art world, Craig & Gaulden used ready-made components to disrupt the architectural expectations of Greenville some half a century later.

The vigor of Greenville County's architecture drained nearly all the life from the Brutalist 'movement' in upstate South Carolina. In 1973, on Main Street, Greenville completed its long-awaited municipal building. Adjacent to it the architects arranged a plaza on the former site of the Old City Hall whose New South Romanesque Revivalism the forward-looking, Better South Brutalism of the Greenville News-Piedmont Building a few dozen yards away had fatally embarrassed. City hall plaza was an arrangement of planes and prisms covered in travertine, less a genuine work of Brutalism than a representation of Brutalism.

The formalist architecture of the new city hall itself partook of a corporate aesthetic but, by clearly displaying the arrangement of its structural frame, it persisted in a commitment to the Brutalist principle of honesty. In a brutally telling detail, the aluminum cladding of the building's exterior stops short of street level to reveal the real structure beneath.

The First Federal Savings & Loan building finally exhausted the possibilities of Brutalism in Greenville. In some respects, it is a homage to local Brutalism, even a eulogy. It certainly makes for a memorable image. Its blocky forms and its sculpturesque presence reflect the salient characteristics of the Greenville Museum across the street. The inverted U-shapes used to frame its vertical strips of fenestration reproduce those of the Greenville Little Theatre's structural piers. But its formalism is aggressive, untempered by any of the strategies that had been used to introduce some degree of aformality into every example of Greenville Brutalism before its date. Its site planning indeed destroys the open aformality of Perry, Shaw, Hepburn & Dean's civic center by converting it to a closed quadrangle. Most strikingly of all, it uses bricks 'as found' but as a revetment detailed in such a way as to deny its tectonic potential as a material -- what Louis Kahn might have called the 'brickness' of brick. Beyond this point there could be no Brutalism, because the First Federal Building finished it off by turning all its principals against themselves, thus reducing Brutalism to a built memory.

With no life left in it, the formalist phase of Brutalism in South Carolina experienced only an afterlife. The late examples are derivative and in one case in Columbia actually posthumous. Greenville's architects, to their credit, limited their participation in the decadence.

Awarded the commission in the late 1970s to add an Art School wing to their Greenville Museum, Craig, Gaulden & Davis then came to bury Brutalism, not to praise it. This annex covered up the museum's picturesquely broken rear façade with a single prismatic element. The main façade of this element they treated in a way curiously reminiscent of the Smithsons' earliest Brutalist work but in fact on par with one of the earliest manifestations of Postmodernism in South Carolina, a building at The Citadel. By 1978 the center of architectural innovation had shifted back from the upstate to Charleston, its original home. Greenville's Brutalist moment had expired. Greenville's collection of concrete Brutalist buildings, though, I contend is unsurpassed in South Carolina. They have the special distinction of having been -- with a single and very significant exception (the Daniel Building) -- all produced by local architects.