Sutpen’s Hundred and the Violence of the Grand Design

Several critics note that the construction of architectural forms is a process laced with violence, that structures then contain dormant violence, and that they will ultimately meet with a violent end. Terry Smith writes that “from at least some of its beginnings … architecture has had various degrees and kinds of violence built, as it were, into it. All building does violence to the natural order,” and anticipates “obsolescence, dilapidation, or replacement—in short, its own destruction” (6). Bernard Tschumi asserts that the violence of architecture is fundamental and unavoidable, and that it originates from surrounding events, as “architecture is linked to events in the same way that the guard is linked to the prisoner, the police to the criminal, the doctor to the patient, order to chaos” (123). Lewis Mumford, in his *The City in History* (1961), writes that all living, built environments will end in the “Necropolis,” “a common graveyard of dust and bones” and “fire scorched ruins” (53). This trajectory of violence features prominently in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* in the manifestation of Thomas Sutpen’s grand design, the plantation house of Sutpen’s Hundred. Moreover, this trajectory goes on to bear profound significance to both the execution of Sutpen’s personal ambition, and to the history of the South. Sutpen’s mansion functions as metaphor for these parallel arcs in its violent rendering on the virgin land of Yoknapatawpha, its participation in slavery, and the violent demise brought about by the ghosts that dwell within its ruined walls.

The metaphorical function of architecture is of crucial importance in much of Faulkner’s work, despite having received little critical attention. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the importance of built spaces manifests from its opening sentence: “they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that—a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers … which … became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust
motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself” (3). Many of the ideas that will be of crucial importance to the rise and fall of Sutpen’s Hundred are foregrounded in these words: the importance of naming a space in establishing its hierarchical position and value, as Sutpen’s Hundred is named for its square acreage; the way that an interior space can freeze time and ideology; the idea that parts of an architectural construction can die, and thus that they exhibit traits of a living thing; and the claustrophobic and confining qualities of interiors, which cause them to resemble crypts or coffins. There is something in the space Rosa now occupies, therefore, which Quentin sees as similar to the space she had once occupied when living in Sutpen’s mansion, and this is given immediate treatment at the start of the novel, highlighting its importance to the story.

The plantation house of Sutpen’s Hundred is a structure Rosa claims appeared to have been built from “nothing” (7). Mr. Compson sees the house as having risen “plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp” (28). This immaculate conception of the house in their descriptions, as well as the equation of Sutpen with an Old Testament God decreeing a commandment in the passage “Be Sutpen’s Hundred like the oldentime Be Light,” shows Rosa’s and Mr. Compson’s conception of the miraculous realization of the architectural project (4). However, the virginity of the land does not preclude a violent birth of Sutpen’s mansion. Quentin notes of Sutpen that “inside of two years he had dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and planted his land” (30). The words “dragged,” “plowed,” and “planted” here suggest a power struggle between Sutpen and the land, and that the realization of his architectural design could only come with the overpowering of the natural order. Once the walls and room were erected, Sutpen “seemed to quit,” to sit in his empty home, and to “remain there for three years during which he did not even appear to intend or want anything more. Perhaps it
is not to be wondered at that the men in the county came to believe that the life he now led had been his aim all the time” (30). It was “vanity” and “pride” which conceived the house, and, Mr. Compson adds, “It was not just shelter, just anonymous wife and children that he wanted, just as he did not want just wedding” (39). The mansion and marriage for Sutpen are a part of a grand design of fashioning himself into a higher hierarchical position. As Thomas Hines notes, Sutpen aims for “a status denied him earlier at another grand house when he had been asked by a haughty servant to go around to the back door” (69). Behind a barricade of respectability, Sutpen endeavors to plaster-over his shady and underhand means of getting to that position, but this endeavor is thwarted by the violence inscribed into the structure of the house itself.

In her retelling of Sutpen’s arrival at Yoknapatawpha, Rosa appears to place particular focus on the plantation’s violent inception, as Quentin recalls: “Colonel Sutpen … came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently.” Going on to describe his marriage to Ellen and their children, Quentin continues: “(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)—and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says” (5). He goes even further to repeat the word “violent”: “[Sutpen] accomplished his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end” (7). Placing these two instances of Sutpen’s design (the design of his architectural project, and the design of his life) side-by-side and showing the violence inherent in each, Quentin invites parallels to be drawn, indicating that the trajectories they follow may bear similarities. Indeed, Sutpen’s determination and ambition in building his house are central to the execution of his life’s plan. Mr. Compson highlights this explicitly: “[Sutpen] was the biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county now, which state he had attained by the same tactics with which
he built his house—the same singleminded unflagging effort and utter disregard of how his actions which the town could see might look and how the indicated ones which the town could not see must appear to it” (56). Though critics such as Mumford and Smith see an implicit violence in architecture, Sutpen’s violent ambition seems to go beyond this. The French architect, who is presumably familiar with the violent rendering of architectural forms on the natural environment, is driven to try to escape Sutpen’s project, fleeing to New Orleans. That someone who works in this industry could be shaken by architectural ambition speaks volumes of the violence of Sutpen’s grand design.

Sutpen’s ruthless ambition in building his house, and the underhand ways in which he goes about this, forcing the town to “compound it” in the process, is emblematic of the very ruthless ambition which accompanies his rise to power (33). Connecting this specifically with Sutpen’s downfall, Quentin recalls:

only an artist [the French architect] could have borne Sutpen’s ruthlessness and hurry and still manage to curb the dream of grim and castlelike magnificence at which Sutpen obviously aimed, since the place as Sutpen planned it would have been almost as large as Jefferson itself at the time; that the grim harried foreigner had singlehanded given battle to and vanquished Sutpen’s fierce and over-weening vanity or desire for magnificence or vindication or whatever it was (even General Compson did not know yet) and so created of Sutpen’s very defeat the victory which, in conquering, Sutpen himself would have failed to gain. (29)

It is clear from this passage that the architect is required to “curb” Sutpen’s character and turn defeat into victory. Without a similar figure to architect Sutpen’s own life, his ascendency to a dream of “castlelike magnificence” could end only in defeat. Hines writes that this story of
ambition tied to the construction and destruction of a plantation house has its origins in a true story. Robert “King” Carter, one of the wealthiest men in Virginia in the 1740s, “allegedly aspired in his grandiose plantation house ‘Corotoman’ to ‘rival or surpass the Governor’s Palace’ in Williamsburg, just as Faulkner would later have Thomas Sutpen decree in *Absalom, Absalom!* that ‘Sutpen’s Hundred’ should rival or surpass the Yoknapatawpha courthouse.” As with Sutpen’s Hundred, the Corotoman “would ultimately succumb to destruction by fire” (54). This similarity appears to compound the idea that there is an inevitability to the trajectory of destruction in the ruthless and violent ambition which built Sutpen’s Hundred, that the house is, as Quentin notes, “doomed” (300).

Returning from to the plantation house after the Civil War, Sutpen is described by Rosa as having been hollowed out, and as bearing an affinity with the decaying house:

*The shell of him was there, using the room which we had kept for him and eating the food which we produced and prepared ... Yes. He wasn’t there. ... [He] talked, not to us ... but to the air, the waiting grim decaying presence, spirit, of the house itself, talking that which sounded like the bombast of a madman who creates within his very coffin walls his fabulous immeasurable Camelots and Carcassonnes... He was absent only from the room, and that because he had to be elsewhere, a part of him encompassing each ruined field and fallen fence and crumbling wall of cabin or cotton house or crib.* (129)

As Rosa does with regards to Sutpen, Shreve will later use the word “shell” to refer to the house itself (173). William T. Ruzicka points out that in moments such as this, “although there are certainly parts of the plantation which are in fair shape after only four years of neglect, Sutpen’s being is affiliated exclusively with the decaying parts of his domain. It is only those ruined, fallen, and crumbling parts of the site which Sutpen inhabits” (54). With the war the grand
design begins to fall, as Sutpen finds his ambition has only been the efforts of a madman, grasping for immortality whilst simultaneously masterminding his own downfall. Shreve, as maniacally loquacious as a Beat poet, sums up this idea when he describes Sutpen not as a “demon” but just a “mad impotent old man who had realized at last that his dream of restoring his Sutpen’s Hundred was not only vain but that what he had left of it would never support him and his family” (147). His retelling of the downfall of Sutpen reduces the man to one possessing none of the grandiose or mythical qualities described by Quentin, Mr. Compson, or Rosa.

The equation of Sutpen’s ruinous decline with the ruin of his mansion brings to mind qualities of the Gothic narrative, and is particularly reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). Entombed within the walls of the House of Usher, Roderick Usher and his twin-sister Madeline are tied to the house in its ruinous decline and eventual destruction. Anthony Vidler describes the House of Usher, with its uncanny, decaying façade and smell of the grave as “a crypt, predestined to be buried in its turn” (18). As the House of Usher becomes crypt to the designs of Roderick Usher, so Sutpen’s design of “Camelots and Carcasonnes” is carried out within the very walls of his coffin. Part of the unnerving and uncanny quality of the House of Usher for the narrator is its similarity to a human body, in its “vacant and eye-like windows” (Poe 199). This similarity makes the house reminiscent of both crypt and corpse. Indeed, Quentin, as with the description of the “dead” paint in Rosa’s office in the opening sentence, describes the smell of the decaying house as being almost like organic decomposition: “the dead furnace-breath air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it were built were flesh” (293). Violence enacted in and on the architectural form is, therefore, equated with violence on the human body, tying Sutpen and his mansion together on a path to ruin. In this
encounter with the ruined house in the final chapter of the novel, Quentin’s descriptions lead Malcolm Cowley to assert that the novel “seems to belong in the realm of Gothic romances, with Sutpen’s Hundred taking the place of the haunted castle on the Rhine” (13). Indeed, Sutpen’s Hundred contains many ghosts within its walls.

Due to its violent inception and propagation of the violent practice of slavery, Sutpen’s Hundred bears its traumatic memory in the form of ghost-like figures. Discovering Jim Bond, Clytie and Henry within its decaying walls, Quentin describes these characters according to their clean white clothes, their possession of “some still profounder, some almost unbearable, quality of bloodlessness,” and of being in a form almost unrecognizable to Rosa, as though they are uncanny apparitions (295-6). To Henry Sutpen, “it was all the same, there was no difference: waking or sleeping he walked down that upper hall between the scaling walls and beneath the cracked ceiling” (298). Ruzicka describes how houses can be zoned as having “public downstairs and private upstairs” (4). As Henry himself is concealed upstairs, he comes to embody some hidden, private memory of the Sutpen design, concealed there in the wake of his violent encounter with Charles Bon. Roaming the hallowed hallways of the crumbling mansion, these characters have ceased to be worldly, functioning creatures, and now occupy some limbo-like state between life and death. Shreve notes how Quentin approached the house as a child, believing the building must be haunted:

just as you had seen the old house too, been familiar with how it would look before you

even saw it, became large enough to go out there one day with four or five other boys of

your size and age and dare one another to evoke the ghost, since it would have to be

haunted, could not but be haunted although it had stood there empty and unthreatening

for twenty-six years and nobody to meet or report any ghost … [you] began daring one
another to enter the house long before you reached it, coming up from the rear, into the old street of the slave quarters. (172-73)

According to Shreve’s telling of Quentin’s story, the children of Yoknapatawpha saw Sutpen’s Hundred as being inevitably haunted, despite its unassuming, inanimate condition.

The reason for this haunting may be found in the pathology of the house’s violent history. As Robert K. Martin writes, Sutpen’s Hundred contains a secret, and “the secret of the house is the secret of the family and the sign of the family’s participation in a primal crime” (131). This secret may be uncovered by viewing the events of the novel as allegory. Cowley asserts that Sutpen’s overall design could be taken to represent the story of the Deep South: “Sutpen’s great design, the land he stole from the Indians, the French architect who built his house with the aid of wild Negroes from the jungle … [and] the final destruction of the mansion like the downfall of a social order: all these might belong to a tragic fable of Southern history” (13). Though Faulkner wrote to Cowley that this had not been his original intention, he does admit having seen the parallels in retrospect (15). If the secret Martin describes can be found in the allegorical reading proposed by Cowley, of Sutpen’s architectural and personal design as a history of the South, the curse of the house and the reason for its ghosts must be found in Faulkner’s idea of a curse of the South. Speaking to this question in an interview with college students, Faulkner asserts matter-of-factly, “The curse [of the South] is slavery, which is an intolerable condition … and the South has got to work that curse out” (“Remarks on Absalom, Absalom!” 287). That Faulkner acknowledges the possibility of reading the design as allegory suggests that the fall of the house of Sutpen can in part be attributed to the curse of slavery. This would align with Quentin’s recollection of visiting the haunted house via the street of the slave quarters: it is the institution of slavery that prefigures his encounter with the ghosts of Sutpen’s Hundred. It is
notable also that Clytie, daughter of Sutpen and a slave (in a sense the result of the connection between white imperialism and slavery) is the character who starts the fire and brings the plantation house of Sutpen’s Hundred (as emblematic of the design of the South) to its destruction.

The plantation house of Sutpen’s Hundred plays a significant role in the story as metaphor for the downfall and ruin of Sutpen’s design, and potentially, as asserted by Cowley, for the downfall of the South. Central among the causes for this is slavery, which foils the attempts of Sutpen at gaining respectability and of successfully establishing a legacy. The violence inherent in architectural construction, as Mumford and Smith assert, and of surrounding events, as Tschumi writes, leads to an inevitable violent conclusion. The image of Sutpen’s Hundred resembling some “Necropolis” or house of the dead is made all the more poignant by the actual destruction of the area of Mississippi that Yoknapatawpha would have occupied, as Hines writes: “the vast New Deal flood-control project … damned the Tallahatchie River and created Sardis Lake … In the late 1950s, Faulkner’s friend Ella Sommerville remarked wistfully and ironically that much of her family’s ancestral property was now at the bottom of Sardis Lake, as—alas—‘Sutpen’s Hundred’ would also have been. It was the fateful merger of two mythical worlds—Yoknapatawpha and Atlantis” (112). Faulkner’s own creation of architectural structures, like Sutpen’s, meets with inevitable ruin, with his map of Yoknapatawpha wiped clean again and the violent cycle of architectural construction coming full circle.
Works Cited


