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# Stained Glass & Sacred Spaces

*The Art and Architecture of Southern Church Windows*

*by Prof. Dorothy Ashford, Advisory Council*

Stand inside the nave of St. Michael's Church in Charleston on a late afternoon in October, and the west-facing windows will fill the sanctuary with a light that is not merely illumination but transformation. The amber and crimson glass, set in lead cames by an unknown craftsman in 1772, converts ordinary sunlight into something that approaches the sacred — a warm, liquid color that pools on the stone floor and climbs the whitewashed walls like a visible hymn.

This is the purpose of stained glass, and it is a purpose that has shaped the architecture of Southern churches for over three centuries. From the earliest Anglican parishes of tidewater Virginia to the grand Catholic cathedrals of New Orleans and Mobile, stained glass has served as both decoration and theology — a medium through which light itself becomes a vehicle for narrative, symbolism, and spiritual aspiration.

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The history of stained glass in the American South differs significantly from its European antecedents. Where the great windows of Chartres and Canterbury were the products of established workshops with centuries of tradition, Southern stained glass was often the work of itinerant craftsmen, local artisans, and, increasingly after the Civil War, commercial studios in the Northeast that shipped pre-fabricated windows to churches across the region.

The earliest surviving stained glass in the South dates to the colonial period and is relatively modest — small panes of colored glass, often imported from England, set in geometric patterns. The elaborate figural programs that characterize later windows were rare before 1840, when the Gothic Revival brought a new enthusiasm for medieval ecclesiastical aesthetics.

The post-Civil War period saw a remarkable flowering of stained glass art in Southern churches. As congregations rebuilt after the destruction of the war, they commissioned windows that served a dual purpose — commemorating the dead and affirming the resilience of their communities. Memorial windows became a distinctive feature of Southern religious architecture, and many of the finest examples date from the 1870s through the 1920s.

The conservation of historic stained glass presents challenges that are both artistic and structural. The lead cames that hold individual pieces of glass deteriorate over time, losing their structural integrity and allowing water infiltration. The glass itself, particularly hand-blown antique glass, is irreplaceable — no modern manufacturing process can reproduce its unique optical qualities.

The Society has partnered with the Stained Glass Association of America to develop a survey of significant church windows across the Southern states. Our goal is to create a comprehensive inventory that will serve as a baseline for conservation planning and a resource for scholars studying the material culture of Southern religion.

We invite congregations and owners of buildings with historic stained glass to participate in this survey. Information and submission forms are available at shps-society.org/stained-glass.

# Book Review

*The Southern Vernacular: Architecture Without Architects by Thomas C. Hubka*

*reviewed by Dr. Benjamin Kincaid*

Thomas Hubka's new study of vernacular architecture in the American South is exactly the kind of book our field needs — rigorously researched, beautifully illustrated, and written with a clarity and warmth that make it accessible to general readers without sacrificing scholarly depth.

Hubka's central argument is that the most historically significant buildings in the South are not the grand plantation houses and urban mansions that dominate popular imagination but the humble, anonymous structures that housed the majority of the population — shotgun houses, dogtrot cabins, saddlebag dwellings, and the various adaptations of vernacular African, Caribbean, and European building traditions that gave the region its distinctive architectural character.

The book's greatest strength is its attention to the lived experience of vernacular architecture. Hubka does not merely catalog building types; he reconstructs the daily realities of life within them — the logic of the dogtrot's central breezeway as a response to subtropical heat, the social dynamics of the shotgun house's linear plan, the ingenious adaptability of the I-house to changing family circumstances.

If there is a limitation, it is one of scope. Hubka's focus on domestic architecture means that other significant categories of vernacular building — churches, schools, stores, barns, and agricultural structures — receive only passing attention. One hopes that a second volume will address these omissions.

Highly recommended for preservationists, architectural historians, and anyone interested in how ordinary Southerners shaped the places they called home. Available from the University of Georgia Press, $45.00.

# Society News

**Annual Symposium:** The Society's 2025 Annual Symposium will be held September 12–14 in Savannah, Georgia. The theme is 'Material Culture and Memory.' Registration opens March 1 at shps-society.org/symposium.

**New Monograph:** 'Columns & Community: Civic Architecture in the Reconstruction South' by Dr. Sarah Michaels is now available. See our shop for details.

**Volunteer Opportunity:** The Society is seeking volunteers for a spring documentation survey in St. Augustine, Florida, March 15–20, 2025. Experience with architectural photography preferred but not required. Contact volunteer@shps-society.org.

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