

At Ease in Our Place

Building lightly on the land—and on our senses

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IT STANDS OVERLOOKING THE ROAD LIKE AN ANCESTORGAZING DOWN ON ITS ILLEGITIMATE SEED.

The Goodwin place was home to four generations of tobacco and corn farmers. Now, the old farmhouse is in the path of strip shopping malls, condominiums and parking lots as U.S. 64 is widened to four lanes between Cary and Pittsboro. The new developments are leveling hills and filling valleys as commerce follows traffic. Car dealerships and big-box stores are set on flattened terraces pushed and carved out by bulldozers. The Goodwin place, by contrast, was built by hand. Because the builders of a hundred years ago couldn't move the land, they dug their foundations into it with sympathy and forethought. It's hard to find a farmhouse in this part of Wake or Chatham county that isn't at peace with the landscape.

It was the old way of building. For years I enjoyed looking at old farmhouses as I drove along U.S. 64 toward the county line. I liked the way these sleepy-looking wooden buildings nestled into the hillsides without disturbing the land. To me, they spoke about our Southern culture as eloquently as bluegrass music, clay pots or storytelling. But as 64 expanded in anticipation of its meeting with the outer beltline, about a dozen of them were scraped away. One that I've admired remains, though—a parched white farmhouse with a green-painted tin roof. A few weeks ago, I stopped by to talk with its owner, Paul Goodwin.

Goodwin was enjoying the late afternoon breeze on his back porch when I arrived. We talked about farming and his mother's possum stew. A mockingbird sang as the whine of 18-wheelers filled the air. "We were brought up tough," he said. "But we knew how to make a dollar and save a dollar. Poor folks didn't travel more

than three or four miles from home."

He moved away when he grew up, living much of his adult life in Moore County. "But I knew this was home, where I'd wind up at."

I felt at ease talking to him. Something about his manner was reflected in the perfect calm of his buildings. His life, his farmland and his buildings seemed to have a quiet grace without hidden forces. "People raised in the country," he told me, "love the country."

When Goodwin was growing up in the 1930s, U.S. 64 was a dirt road. He can remember the church bell ringing at 9:30 a.m. from Olive Grove Baptist Church down the way. "That meant we had 15 minutes to walk to Sunday School," he said.

His family, like many others in the clay hills around Olive Grove, New Hill and Martha's Chapel farmed their corn and tobacco with mules. They grew everything they ate, from hogs to corn meal, on no more land than one family could tend, usually less than a hundred acres. Generations of farmers, craftsmen and small-store owners raised their families within walking distance of country churches. When we think of values like thrift, strong family ties, faith in God and a sense of place, we call to mind places like Olive Grove and Martha's Chapel.

These values were often expressed in churches, farmhouses and barns made by the simplest of means. No one got rich off this clay and rocky soil. Everything was put up stingy, built for a purpose out of the cheapest materials and using the least effort. Pine logs were dragged by a mule-drawn wagon to the sawmill, and came back as sawn boards. There were three or four basic farmhouse plans. But though the plans were basic, no two homeplaces were alike. Every house was different because of its relationship to hill and valley. Farmers planted trees to shade the house. They added porches according to the local breeze and view. Every house had a front porch, though, a place to watch the world go by.

The front porch of the Goodwin place faces U.S. 64, now four lanes wide.

The gravel road leading to the house is gently sloped, so it won't wash away in a storm. A row of neatly spaced wooden porch chairs greets a visitor. The back porch is shaded by trees and screened in, a place for shelling peas and sleeping in a hammock. South, east and west porches shade the rooms of the house. The west porch is the one for admiring a sunset. Trailing downhill from the house are a corncrib, a wash house, a smokehouse, a hay barn, tool sheds and a tobacco-factoring pit. All of the outbuildings except the barn were built by Cammie Goodwin, who lived here from 1953 until his death four years ago. Barn, outbuildings and house are built of pine boards, perched on stone piers. Rainwater flows under them, and they seem to sit on the undisturbed hillside as lightly as butterflies. The old barn has adjusted itself over the years to fit the hill like a mule reclining. So its pine siding sways in an S-curve.

On the hill next to the Goodwin place, Goldston's Building Supply Co. opened a new distribution center in April. Goldston's builder shaved off the hill, paved it and installed a prefabricated, air-conditioned steel box. Most new developments in the Triangle reshape the land to fit the building, just like Goldston's did. But the Goodwin place may offer a better, more economical way to go.

Everything about the Goodwin place is plainspoken and down-to-earth. Yet these simple farm buildings have a rare, unintended beauty—beauty like what we see in a baseball hat, a sailboat or a window seat.

The writer James Agee, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, said that such houses have "a look of being most earnestly handmade, as a child's drawing, a thing created out of need, love, patience and strained skill in the innocence of a race." Old farmhouses were built with respect for the land. Agee thinks they have genius.

The people who are building today along U.S. 64, on the other hand, ignore the land. With their heavy equipment, they bulldoze hills that 20 years ago were too steep to develop

at all. Is it possible for them to build today in sympathy with the land? Can we retain the old values in the new!

The College of Veterinary Medicine at N.C. State University occupies the crest of a hill on Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh. The architects, Gerald McCue and the firm of Ferebee Walters and Associates, gave the college a silhouette of small metal roofs and an informal, rambling plan reminiscent of traditional farm building. They tucked the parking lot alongside in a grove of trees. Fences and pasture sweep up to the walls of this modern but familiar-looking building. It was built economically and with forethought for the land.

The College of Veterinary Medicine is larger than most shopping centers, but it sits on a knoll meadowland as comfortably as the old Goodwin place.

St. Giles Presbyterian Church was built on a sloping, woody site in Oak Park,, Raleigh. Its architect, Harwell Hamilton Harris, was a native Californian who seemed to understand intuitively the character of old North Carolina farm buildings. Harris designed St. Giles as a cluster of wood-shingled church and fellowship buildings embracing a pine woods on a hillside. The hill slopes down to a brook. Less than a dump truck full of earth was moved to make the building foundations. Each building is sheltered by a generous porch.

St. Giles was prefabricated, like most new buildings in the Triangle. But Harris used wood windows, from Iowa, pine beams from Louisiana and cedar shingles from Canada to make a structure that seems quietly at ease beside a brook in North Carolina.

The brook at the old Goodwin place begins downhill from the hay barn and meanders to Jordan Lake. I wonder about its fate when "improvement" comes. For, as Goodwin said, "It won't be many years when you won't see this old stuff around. And I'm not one to stand in the way of progress."

In "A Brook in the City," poor Robert Frost mourned the loss of a stream entombed in a sewer to make flat land for development.

No one would know except for ancient maps that such a brook ran water. But I wonder if from its being kept forever under, the thought may not have risen that so keep this new-built city from both work and sleep.

Do the thoughts that keep people in the Triangle from work and sleep come from wasting the land, the same as the calmness and ease of the old Goodwin place come from saving the land?

Streams like the one grieved by Frost begin on hillsides. Today, in the Triangle, we build on hillsides too steep for a farmer to plow. Improvement flattens the land, but old buildings that sit on hillsides without disturbing them have genius.

When we learn to build with the flow of the land instead of against it, we may be more at ease with ourselves. We may even sleep better.