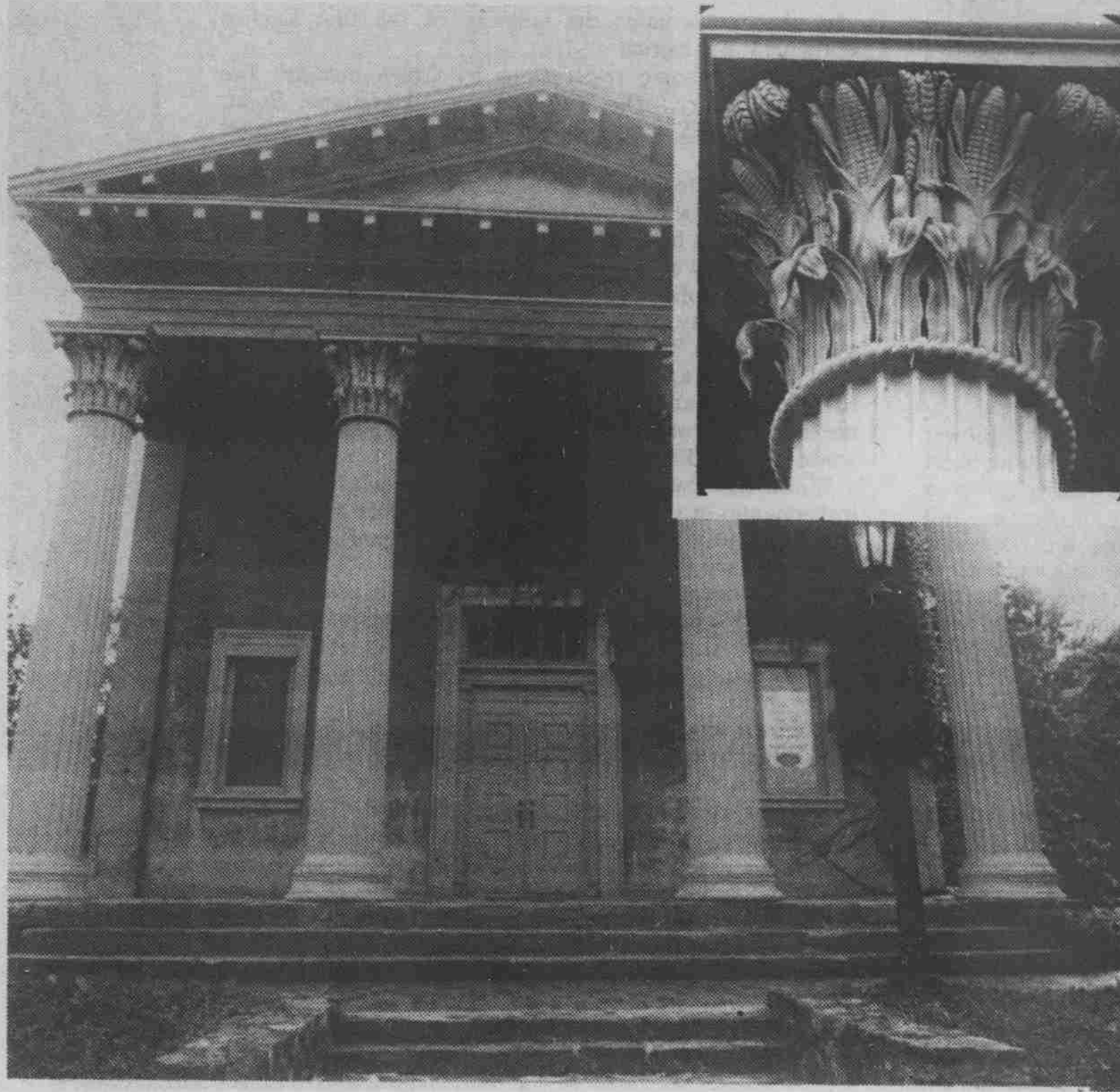


# A mix of excellent, competent and miserable

by John Watson  
DTH Contributor

A handy rule of thumb to remember when considering the architecture of UNC, or that of any of our neighboring universities, is that a university's architecture must inevitably reflect something of the character of the institution that operates on its campus. Consider N.C. State's red sunbaked brickyard that matches so well the student body, or Duke's pretentious and gaudy neo-Gothic cloisters that suggest nothing so much as a second-rate Princeton or Yale. UNC's architecture, an eclectic hodgepodge of the excellent, the competent and the miserable, is equally indicative of the character of the nation's first state university. From the stately group of Old East, South Building and Old West, that have aged so gracefully and handsomely since their construction nearly two hundred years ago, to the utterly reprehensible 1960's South Campus highrises, whose design never should have left the architect's drawing board, there is an exceptional variety of buildings here at UNC. Some of these buildings are to be admired, others to be accepted, and many, I fear, are to be deplored. The incoming freshman may come to find that his reaction to the Carolina classroom may resemble strongly this reaction to Carolina architecture.

Much of the twentieth century construction on campus is done in a brick Neo-Georgian style, that was obviously chosen by a staid and conservative administration as a suitably serene, and tranquil style for a staid and conservative university. The effect, as on the grass between Manning and Carroll Halls, can be pleasing and harmonious, although hardly exciting. Splendid work by the grounds crew has made the area around Manning, Saunders and Murphy perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing spot on campus, particularly at cherry blossom season in the spring, and this has improved the effect of the buildings tremendously. The newer buildings across the way, Gardner,



The Corinthian columns of the Playmakers Theatre (above) are topped, not with the anticipated acanthus leaves, but with fresh ears of corn: husks, cobs, silks and all.

The area around Manning, Saunders and Murphy (right) is, thanks to the UNC grounds crew, one of the most aesthetically pleasing spots on campus.



unobtrusively in the pines between civilization and South Campus. The architect utilized his site perfectly, creating a strong and impressive concrete sculpture that dominates neither the individual nor the landscape, and yet holds 50,000 people for football games. It is a brilliant achievement.

I am not as familiar with the Law School, that hugs the hill rising above the Astro-turf lacrosse field on the east side of campus, but it also appears to be an excellent building. Like the architect of Kenan, this architect has designed a structure that conforms with the landscape. He has incorporated the slope of the hill into the design of the building, so that the interior space flows naturally from the entrance at the top of the hill down into a snack bar, offices, TV room and library stack space at the bottom of the hill. Back in 1909, Frank Lloyd Wright showed with the Robie House in Chicago how a building could conform to its natural setting. The architects of Kenan and the Law School, working with entirely different structures, have both learned well from the old master.

The most amusing architectural touch at UNC is to be found at the Playmaker's Theater, a nondescript little Greek Revival building from the early nineteenth century that is flanked by South and Steele Buildings. Everything appears normal until you run your eyes up the Corinthian columns on the porch of the east entrance. At the top of each column is not the anticipated bunch of acanthus leaves, but an exquisitely carved group of fresh ears of corn; husks, cobs, silks and all. It seems that the Americans built the structure in the Greek Revival style to honor Athenian genius, but to add a homegrown touch replaced the acanthus leaves with a symbol of Southern agricultural bounty, ears of corn. These columns are strikingly visual evidence that Americans were nouveaux riches as early as the 1830's. Even in the year of the Bicentennial, you are not likely to find a more genuine example of nineteenth century Americana anywhere.

Carroll and Hanes may with time acquire a similar beauty. On the whole the Neo-Georgian heart of the campus is quite satisfactory.

Unfortunately some of the Neo-Georgian buildings on the fringes of the campus do not merit such praise. I would call Coker Hall, perched on the hill across from Kenan Chemistry Labs on Highway 54, an unhappy building, with its ludicrous stone entrance that might have been punched into a banal exterior by a most insensitive automatic stamping

machine.

I cannot pass so lightly over the Ackland Art Museum on the corner of Franklin and Columbia streets. The building is the first on the UNC campus that the visitor coming from Interstate 85 is likely to see, and a more discouraging introduction to our university can hardly be imagined. The Ackland is a remarkable combination of the boring and the hilarious. The monotonous banality of its long low exterior is broken only by the

outlandish Renaissance dummy windows pasted on each end, that go with the building about as well as flying buttresses would go with the Parthenon. The interior of the teaching wing is even worse: a cramped rabbit warren, either blazing hot, or freezing cold, and lit so poorly that the studio art people couldn't see what they were doing and had to flee to Lenoir Hall. How the art history department, supposedly steeped in the traditions of the West's finest architecture, can

bear its quarters in the Ackland, which is the worst Neo-Georgian building at UNC, and maybe in the entire world, is beyond me.

There are two particularly fine modern structures on campus. Both Kenan Stadium and the UNC Law School are distinguished enough to make one forget at least temporarily, those two monuments to the worst in modern architecture, Greenlaw and Hamilton Halls.

I think Kenan Stadium is especially good, nestled

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