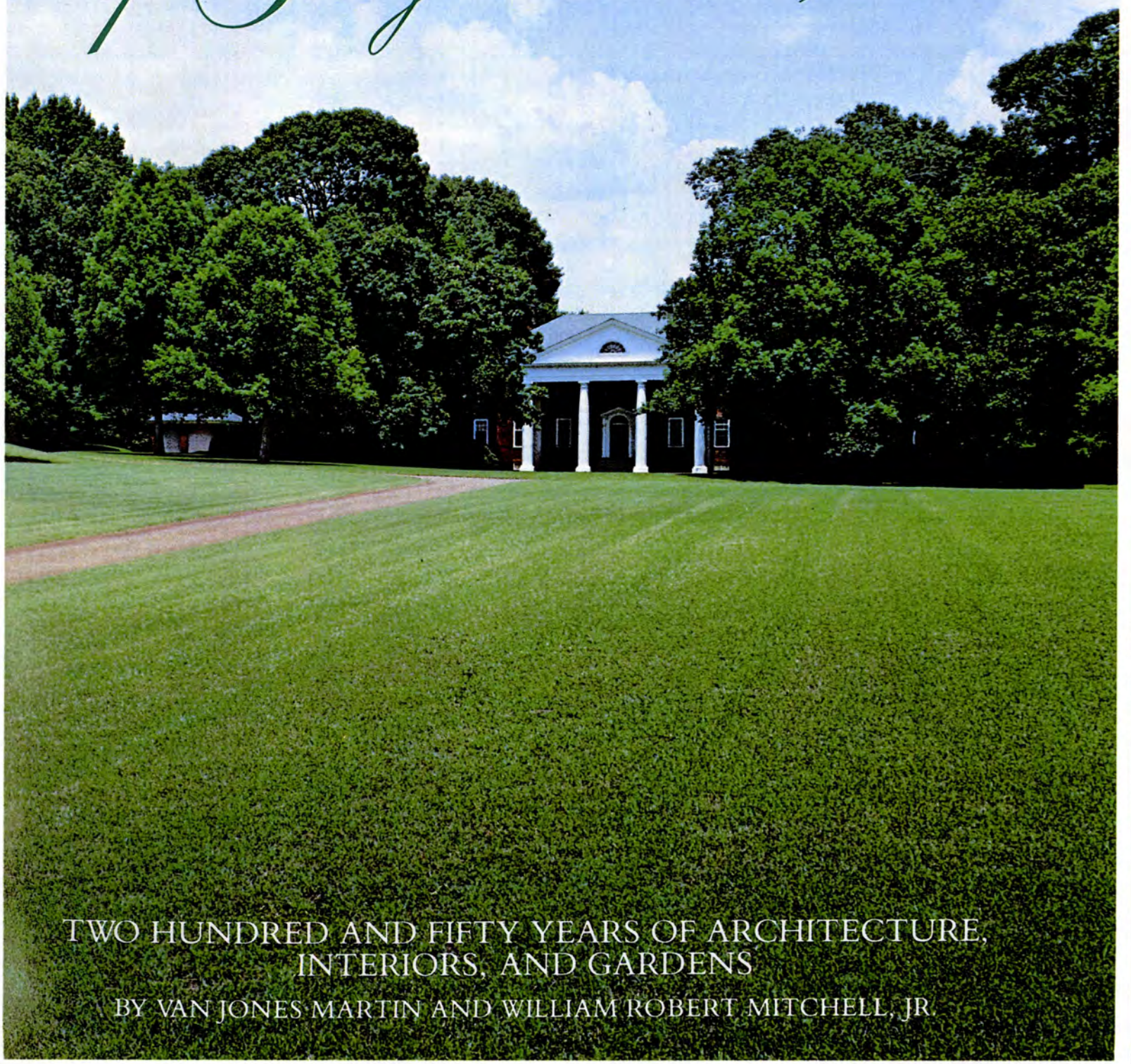
Landmark Homes of Georgia 1733-1983



TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF ARCHITECTURE, INTERIORS, AND GARDENS

BY VAN JONES MARTIN AND WILLIAM ROBERT MITCHELL, JR.

Julian Hightower House

1947-1949 Philip Shutze, FAIA

Thomaston, Upson County

Grace and Julian Hightower's place at Thomaston is one of my favorites.

Philip Shutze, September 10, 1981

THE HIGHTOWER HOUSE is the last great country house built in Georgia in the tradition that reached fine flower in eighteenth-century England in the hands of William Kent. And it is the last great house that Philip Shutze did in Georgia before his retirement (a suburban house in Greenville, South Carolina, was his very last). It is most probably the last great country house built in America in the classical tradition as revived during the American Renaissance of the last part of the nineteenth century; which then extended into the twentieth, becoming even more refined in the hands of Shutze and his colleagues (such men as David Adler of Chicago).

Moreover, the Hightower House is a culmination of the American country house as a type – ultimately going back to the great houses of Virginia, American versions of the English prototypes. This house makes specific references to the kind of architecture and estate which Thomas Jefferson's genius gave a new impetus and new form, in the example he set with his villa, Monticello, and with those of his friends whom he helped: James Madison, for example. Madison's Montpelier (c.1810) was one source of the American classical vernacular which Shutze used in planning this splendid house for his friends, Grace and Julian Hightower of Upson County, Georgia. But more than any of the other Georgia country houses that are comparable in quality, this house is truly a *country* house, for it is several miles outside of town – out in the county – on a large developed tract (3800 acres) with an 80-acre lake which was planned as part of the total composition.

The house is approached through a well-tended, park-like woods, on a winding drive that follows the natural contours of the rolling terrain. The drive opens onto a great lawn — a closely-cropped meadow – which sweeps without interruption to a gleaming white Jeffersonian portico. In the Tuscan Doric order, it is set against rose-red bricks and enframed by the deep green of towering hardwood trees. It is on axis with the viewer, down a straight, earth-colored drive. This drive becomes a line of sight cutting through the lawn, aimed for the front entrance, directing the eye – if one could see that far – through the wide central hall of the house to the garden door and then out onto a deep terrace, partly enclosed by boxwoods. Then the line of sight continues down a low flight of stairs onto a sloping lawn which descends to the edge of a placid lake, a wide expanse of water bordered by tall Georgia pines on the far shore. Symmetrical, orderly and perfectly composed, with a greater degree of formality in the architecture than in the landscape (and greater elaboration inside than outside), it is all in the eighteenth-century Anglo-Palladian country house manner. The house is only an element in the total landscape and the landscape is like a great open meadow.

OPPOSITE: Entrance façade. ABOVE: Garden façade.

The English Palladian, William Kent, was the first to do that. As Horace Walpole (1717-1797) has said: "Kent was the first to leap the fence and see that all nature is a garden." This revolutionized both the relation of house to landscape and the landscape itself: baroque and geometrical elaborations – parterre gardens and cascades of water (as Shutze used at the Swan House) were no longer

used. The Julian Hightower House is a mid-twentieth century example of that school of design.

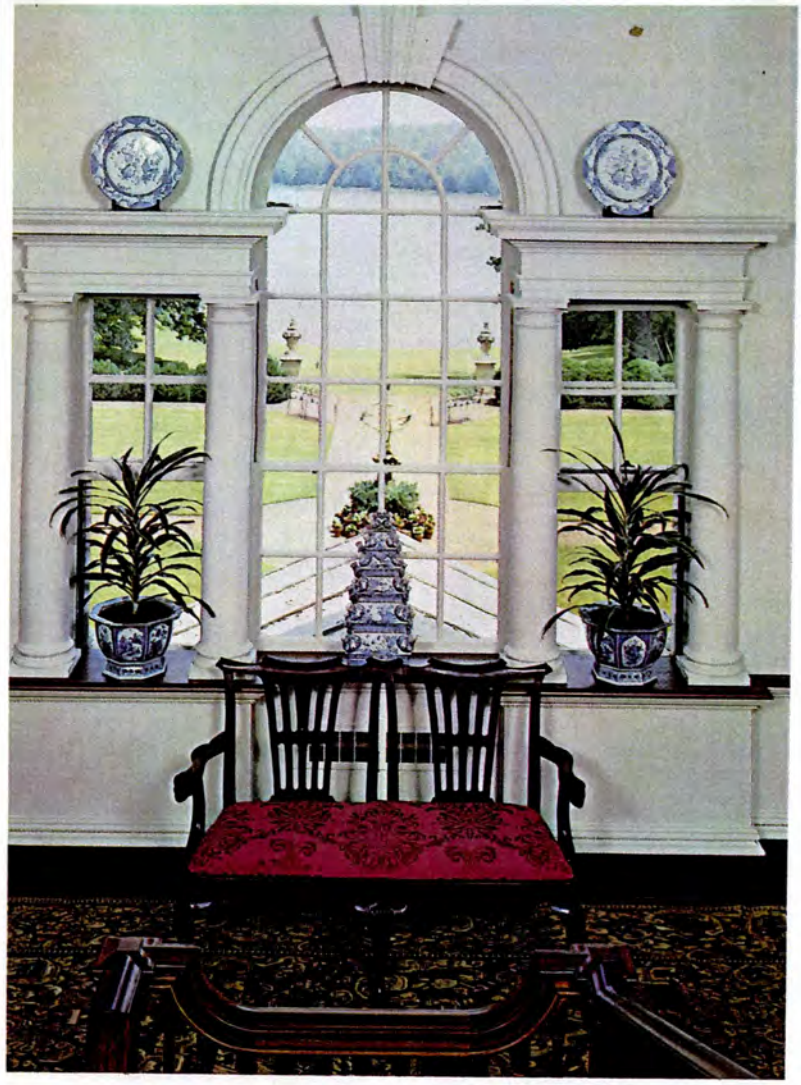
In the late 1940's when the Hightowers had Shutze do this house, its supreme quality of neoclassicism may well have been unique at that time in the United States. It certainly was the only one in Georgia. It was, in a manner of speaking, an anachronism, for the country house era was supposedly over, and classicism and academic eclecticism was theoretically dead (even despised in some circles). Client and architect achieved an ideal architectural form of the kind that Geoffrey Scott championed in *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914).

Mrs. Hightower has said that the site was selected about 1940 and plans laid to build, but the war intervened. The Tuscan portico nestles in its background of trees as though it were a classical garden pavilion in the distance on a great mid-eighteenth-century estate such as Stowe. It is a serene and neat setting of the kind that Kent (and later Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton) devised with great artiface, moving heaven and earth to make the landscape seem picture-perfect. Walpole said:

ABOVE: Dining Room. This room has been arranged and decorated in this way since 1949. OPPOSITE: Dining Room detail. H. J. Millard carved this chimneypiece, as well as all other such features throughout the house, based on Philip Shutze's designs.

"An open country is but a canvas on which a landscape might be designed. Any tract of land whose characteristic expressions have been strengthened by art and which the spontaneous arrangements of nature have improved by the hand of taste, ought to be considered a garden." That is the kind of total garden one finds under the Georgia sun at the Hightower House.

Inside, formality and Kentian classicism prevail, which is in keeping with the Georgian revival exterior. (On the terrace façade, for example, Shutze used a Palladian, or Venetian, window, in the manner of Kent, above a one-story classical porch.) Shutze once explained how interior and exterior details were handled. He said: "We made models and castings of all detailing; then we found the artisans to execute our designs." The wood-



TOP: View from Stairlanding through Palladian window. ABOVE: Music Room. This was originally an open porch. Philip Shutze and his assistant, James Means, enclosed it for the Hightowers in 1962. ABOVE RIGHT: Drawing Room. Mrs. Hightower called on the late Charles Townsend of W. E. Browne Decorating Company, Inc. to help her, and since his death, David Richmond Byers III.

carver, Herbert J. Millard, a native of Bath, England (who was brought to Atlanta from Cincinnati, Ohio, to do the woodcarving at the Swan House) worked on almost every structure Shutze designed, including the Hightower House. Here Mr. Millard did the doorway entablatures and chimneypieces. The chimneypiece in the dining room is especially outstanding; a marble one at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, England, by William Kent, was the precedent for Shutze's design.

It was Kent who first provided the kind of professional service Mr. Shutze performed for the Hightowers, designing the inside and outside as a harmonious unit. Also, as with Kent's Houghton Hall, the Hightower House has large formal rooms that are always

ready for company; their chief function is the formal display of works of art and fine furniture, especially chosen to compliment the architecture.

As Mark Girouard has written in his *Life in the English Country House* (1979): "The architects and builders of country houses were . . . producing buildings designed to fit the particular way of life of the landed gentry." Members of the Hightower family have long been the textile magnates of Thomaston. They have played the role in Upson County of the English gentry and this reflects that role. Moreover, as Girouard has written, "A classical portico could be more than a symbol of its owner's culture and education. It could also symbolize his place in the social order."

That is what the great classical country houses of the South had always done; they had stood for the established order, the timeless, ancestral and civilized values dating back to Greece and Rome, to the Mother Country of England and the Mother Colony and State of Virginia. This house, built only a few years after World War II – in the first years of the Atomic Age – is in that tradition. It shows that, despite monumental changes, Georgians had not lost their sense of the old order, of hierarchy and civilization; and that Georgians in 1948 still believed in the eternal verities as expressed in the classic French saying: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." (The more things change, the more they remain the same.)