

King's Ex

STATES OF GRACELAND

Graceland: The Living Legacy of Elvis Presley. San Francisco: Collins Publishers, 1993. 150 pp., illus., \$45

Reviewed by Karal Ann Marling

Elvis loved Christmas – and almost everything else (cars, food, flashy clothes) – excessively. During the holidays, his driveway was lit up with so many colored lights that his father feared it would be mistaken for one of the runways at the nearby Memphis airport. The crèche on the front lawn was the size of a luxury suite at the Las Vegas Hilton. Given his King-size zest for the season (his own birthday fell on January 8), it is fitting that this Christmas's lushest, plushiest, shiniest gift book was *Graceland: The Living Legacy of Elvis Presley*.

The book is a tribute to Elvis, presented in the form of an art-gallery-style catalogue of his house on the shopping-mall-and-fast-food outskirts of Memphis. There are handsome color photographs of the dwelling, inside and out, and of all the added sections that have effectively made a home into a museum: the car and airplane displays across the street, the permanent exhibitions of his gold records and stage costumes. The photos are accompanied by a series of pertinent factoids, many of which, judging from his previous remarks about the site, seem to have been contributed by Todd Morgan, director of communications for Graceland, Inc., the corporate entity that manages the complex on behalf of the singer's daughter and sole heir. The long introductory essay – another Presley biography, really, in which the house figures as a minor family member – is the work of *Rolling Stone* senior editor Chet Flippo, who almost 17 years ago wrote one of the two best accounts of Elvis's funeral.

The other memorable story filed on that occasion was by Caroline Kennedy, and what set the Flippo and Kennedy articles apart from the rest was their concern with the physical and stylistic characteristics of the event. While Kennedy registered a kind of polite horror at the garish interior of Graceland, Flippo just took it all in and reported in detail on what he saw. His remains one of the most riveting descriptions of the bleeding-heart-red-with-rhinestones decor that Priscilla Presley quietly banished before opening the house to paying visitors five years later.



Max Furbringer and Merrill Ehrman, architects, Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee, 1938-40.

The tasteful blue-satin-and-white-wall-to-wall house we tour today is not the house Elvis died in. There were reports just before Christmas that Priscilla, on behalf of the estate, might try to have *Graceland: The Living Legacy* suppressed because the Flippo text was too critical of her late husband, or too forthcoming about personal excesses chronicled elsewhere by detractors like sleaze biographer Albert Goldman. It was surely in the interests of protecting the legacy of Elvis Presley from charges of tackiness or worse that the interior was prettified for popular consumption. But Priscilla Presley had nothing to worry about. Flippo, alas, is not interested in what the house has to say about its most famous owner and about the problem of Southernness in general. Nor does he credit Elvis with making a conscious and complicated aesthetic decision when he chose to buy a genuine Memphis mansion, one sufficiently refined to have been admitted to the architecturally fastidious National Register of Historic Places.

The chronicle of Graceland begins with an item in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Tucked in among the week's society news in late October 1940, Ida Clemens's article on the year-old "manor" house of Dr. and Mrs. T. D. Moore in suburban Whitehaven was not her usual Sunday real estate feature, although she described the Georgian Colonial structure in the kind of lush detail calculated to ensnare potential buyers. It was, she told readers of the *Commercial Appeal*, positively palatial: a huge, green-shuttered home built of white Tishomingo stone, specially shipped in for the Moores. Outside, four two-story columns supported a pediment over the front door. Inside there were decorative walls of glass brick and several "picture" windows – very modern – as well as a more traditional white marble fireplace. Downstairs, across the front, ran a sequence of oyster-white formal rooms – reception hall, dining room, parlor, solarium – large enough to seat fully 500 people when the daughter of

the family, a promising music student, played her harp for company. And play Ruth Marie most surely would, for the Moores enjoyed a high social standing in the community that Miss Clemens divined in the architectural character and setting of "Graceland," their new country abode.

"As you roll up the drive, you sense its fine heritage of the past in its general feeling of aristocratic kindness and tranquility," she confided. A subtle, burnished elegance matched the bloodlines of Mrs. Moore, née Brown, a Toof on her mother's side. The Toofs had owned the rise overlooking Highway 51, with its grove of towering oaks, for almost a century. That land had been named Graceland after Grace Toof, Mrs. Moore's aunt, a previous owner of the estate. The furnishings of the new house (also called Graceland) were Toof heirlooms, for the most part imported from the ancestral manse at Linden and Lauderdale in the heart of Memphis: a six-foot Chinese vase purchased at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, a gilt-bronze chandelier with crystal prisms, and lots of pier mirrors framed in antique gold leaf. "Colonial courtliness." "Majestic columns." "Subtle luxury." Wow! A house fit for demigods, antebellum planters, or kings.

Furbringer and Ehrman, architects, had drawn up the preliminary plans for Graceland in 1938. Theirs was a relatively new firm, established three years before. But Max H. Furbringer, the senior partner, had been in Memphis since 1901, when he completed his architectural apprenticeship at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Young Furbringer left the exposition, bound for Texas and a great Western adventure, only to be diverted South by lurid reports of a yellow-fever epidemic raging in Memphis. Perhaps all the architects had perished, he thought. And so he stopped and stayed – and in 1904 formed a 30-year partnership with

Walk C. Jones that produced some of the most impressive architecture in the region. Jones & Furbringer built churches, courthouses, and schools. They were best known, however, for homes in the grand, neo-Georgian mode, awash in classical ornament. For the first major Colonial Revival residence in Memphis, the sumptuous C. Hunter Raine House of 1904–1906, Jones & Furbringer served as associates to the upriver architect W. J. Dodd, of Louisville. Thereafter, the grammar of giant porticoes, dentilation, and dark shutters set against brick or stone became their own. An early picture portfolio of recent work by the pair emphasized the residential side of their practice, and in fact Furbringer's only published discourse on architectural theory came in a 1916 treatise titled *Domestic Architecture*.

In that little book, Furbringer presented the rudiments of what Emily Post and others would later call "personality," or the imperative to reflect the character of the owner in the arrangement and, more particularly, the decoration of the house. A revivalist by conviction, Furbringer aimed to express "the tastes and refinement" of his clients in the period details of his residential projects. "People are no longer content with a house," he wrote. "They demand that environment which creates the atmosphere of 'home'" – or houses, like Graceland, imbued with built-in sentiment, meaning, and status.¹ Eugene Johnson and Robert Russell, Jr., in their recent guide to Memphis architecture, note that a full-blown Colonial Revival swept the city in the 1940s and 1950s. According to their chronology, Graceland stands at the beginning of a new wave of architecture premised on the postwar triumph of American values.² But Graceland can also be seen as the last of the great antebellum mansions of the planter aristocracy of Memphis, or a splendid example of the Tara fever of the 1930s.

Margaret Mitchell's epic Civil War novel, *Gone With the Wind* (1936), helped to create a positive image of the New South in the thirties, when national opinion regarding the region was overwhelmingly negative. Whereas the Southern stereotype ran to pellagra, sharecroppers, poverty, racism, and the conservative congressmen Franklin Roosevelt tried unsuccessfully to purge in 1938, Mitchell's best seller featured a beautiful, plucky heroine whose adventures cen-

tered on her efforts to save her family home – Tara – and the gracious way of life tramped underfoot by the advancing Yankees. Nonetheless, Mitchell had nothing but scorn for the moonlight-and-magnolias sentiment that would idealize a make-believe, bygone South as a retreat from unpleasant realities in the Depression era. And she waged a running battle with producer David O. Selznick to prevent the movie version of her book from prettifying the raw, red-clay Georgia where Rhett and Scarlett played out their tempestuous romance.

In the end, the struggle resolved itself into a contest of wills over architecture. The American public had already decided that Clark Gable was the dashing Rhett Butler. The technical side of filmmaking was clearly Hollywood's business. But Mitchell saw the great plantation houses of her story – Scarlett's "clumsy, sprawling" Tara, which survives the war, and the lovely Twelve Oaks, which does not – as the symbolic essence of *Gone With the Wind* and rightly feared that moviedom would give the settings the grandeur and scale of "the Grand Central Station," if that's what it took to sell tickets. It all came down to columns. Selznick, whose production company was headquartered in the colonnaded majesty of a white antebellum mansion, circa 1924, originally built as a movie set, liked 'em. Columns were classy, tasteful. He used his office building, in fact, as the on-screen trademark for Selznick Pictures, along with the slogan "In the Tradition of Quality." Columns suggested tradition and quality, the wealth and elegance swept away by the Civil War. Mitchell, through surrogates planted among his technical advisers, waged a successful rear-guard action to limit the Greek Revival columns on Twelve Oaks to the façade only and to keep them off Tara altogether (although it would sport tall brick pilasters).

Beginning in 1936, auto tourists descended on Atlanta, expecting to see the fictional Tara in the flesh, and were sorely disappointed when they were shown real but columnless houses of the 1840s and 1850s. Magazines ran features on historic houses in Mississippi and Louisiana that looked more satisfactory, thanks to a plethora of flutes and capitals. *House and Garden* in November 1939 published a sneak preview of the movie in the form of Kodachrome views of the backlot Tara. "To most of us," confessed the editors, "the South in all its romantic splendor and unfading charm is summed up forever in the stately plantation house with tall columns . . . set in the midst of rolling green fields."³

Graceland was a timely and evocative copy of the historic architecture of the Middle South. The doorway, with its sidelights and miniature order of engaged columns, could have come straight from publicity stills for *Gone With the Wind*.

More likely, however, it came from Clanlo, a surviving Memphis plantation house of the 1850s fronted by a four-column portico of exceedingly slender proportions and Corinthian capitals bearing flattened acanthus leaves. These details, also found on the 1852 Pillow-McIntyre House, constitute a kind of antebellum Memphis style. It may well be that this peculiar handling of the acanthus ornament alludes to the lotus plant and to the city's exotic Egyptian name. In any case, the Memphian columns and capitals of Graceland give the generic plantation tradition a strong regional flavor: if the good doctor, with his hobby herd of purebred Herefords, was playing Ol' Massah or Rhett Butler in his imposing white manse on the hill, Mrs. Moore's sterling local lineage (she belonged to the Colonial Dames of the 17th Century) was also subtly acknowledged in the decorative program. There was a little pergola in the back, too, built of columns rescued from an old Memphis manor house. "The pergola may be simply a decorative adjunct or it may serve a useful purpose as an outdoor retreat,"⁴ Furbringer wrote. Graceland was big, showy, see-it-from-the-road, old-lace-and-honeysuckle, pseudo-plantation Southern – a thoroughly modern house, in other words – but it was also a genteel retreat from the hucksterism of a culture in which *Gone With the Wind* premiered all across the Cotton Belt in 1939 and 1940 in movie houses adorned with cardboard columns.

The Memphis of Max Furbringer and Merrill Ehrman caught Scarlett fever in 1938, when the fashionable Peabody Hotel downtown added a roof garden with a to-die-for Tara motif. But, while he continued to accept commissions from the Peabody crowd for Taras of their very own, Furbringer's interests came increasingly to center on the social effects of public housing for the poor. In 1935, he was named chairman of the newly created Memphis Municipal Housing Administration, and he eventually supervised construction of two major black housing complexes. He dragged prominent citizens to bleak inner-city slums and made movies illustrating the alternative – two-story brick projects with attenuated Georgian details in which tidy apartments rented for as little as \$4 a month. In 1956, a year before Furbringer succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 77, the housing authority's annual report cited its properties as clean, healthful, and elevating of taste. They were temporary accommodations, way stations on the road to middle-class respectability. Why, in the past five years alone, one in seven resident families had purchased houses of their own. "A typical example of this rapid turnover," the document concluded, "is the case of Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Presley and their now-famous son, Elvis," formerly of Lauderdale Courts.⁵ By the time the report appeared, 22-year-old rock 'n' roll star Elvis Presley



The front stairs display Elvis's guitar collection for this 1993 photograph.

had bought Graceland for \$100,000. It was a classic case of upward mobility, a textbook illustration of the American dream in action: a poor boy, born in 1935 in a tiny, two-room shotgun house on the wrong side of the tracks in Tupelo, Mississippi, and raised in the Memphis projects, now owned the classiest house in town – a house that signified good taste, good breeding, and the distilled, mythical essence of the South. The *Memphis Press-Scimitar* said as much, in a headline story on the purchase. Rumor had it that Vernon Presley wanted to move to Hollywood, which he had recently visited to watch his boy make a movie. All the Presleys had enjoyed their bus tour of the stars' gorgeous homes. But "the traditional Southern beauty of Graceland" convinced Elvis and his mother, Gladys, to come back to Memphis, Tennessee.⁶ There white columns and green lawns could never be confused with producers' offices and backlot real estate.

The stories in the Memphis papers all drew the inevitable rags-to-riches moral from Elvis's ascent to Graceland but, with the exception of one caption that called the house a "castle" for literary effect, the local press treated it as a normal house, albeit somewhat larger than the new, suburban ranch-style dwelling (mobbed by fans) the Presleys were vacat-

ing for the welcome privacy of 13.8 acres. By April 1957, however, when the family finally moved in, Graceland had become a mansion, and finally the Mansion.

For the national media, which treated the wiggly young Presley as a prime example of what was wrong with that portion of the country below the Mason-Dixon Line, the term signified Southernism – a Southern mansion, a squalid whited sepulcher without the sweetness and light of MGM's Tara. After the death of an overweight, middle-aged Elvis in 1977, his detractors called his home a "Peckerwood Palace," a "Hillbilly Hilton," to signify much the same distaste. But for the extended Presley family, to whom Graceland was also the Mansion, the phrase echoed the Bible and the lyrics of the old hymns Elvis loved to play on the piano in what had once been Mrs. Moore's solarium. His first gospel album, *His Hand in Mine*, released in 1961, just after Elvis returned to Memphis from two long, difficult years of military service, contained several songs that directly addressed the issue of home as heaven, or the mansion as a mark of God's benevolent grace. "I've got a mansion just over the hilltop," he sang with a quaver of real emotion in his voice: "In my Father's house there are many mansions." Surely one of them was



Bernie Grenadier, contractor, Meditation Garden, 1965. Mrs. Moore's classical pergola gave way to Elvis's take on Eastern religions, then became the final resting place for the King (second grave from left) and clan.



Bill Eubanks, interior designer, the TV Room, 1974. Sixties chrome, glass, and bright yellow accents.

Graceland, down in Memphis, Tennessee. It was heaven on earth.

Between the Moores and the Presleys yawned a chasm of class, nowhere better expressed than on the interior of Graceland, where Ruth Brown Moore's dynastic treasures were replaced with new, modern pieces in theatrical blacks and whites, some of them – like the vast, 15-foot living room couch – custom-made. Elvis's people had been poor for as long as anybody could remember. There were no Smith or Presley heirlooms. Nor was the past reflexively cherished. The shotgun house back in Mississippi was a benchmark against which to measure a new-found prosperity to be celebrated with brand new things, in all the latest styles. "When I was growing up in

Tupelo," Elvis said, "I lived with enough . . . antiques to do one for a lifetime."⁷ The oyster-white walls were painted a deep decorator blue, the hardwood floors were covered with thick, wall-to-wall carpeting in a deep red, and the marble mantelpiece was cast adrift in a sea of mirrors. That first Christmas at Graceland, there was a white tree in the dining room, trimmed with red ornaments. It revolved and played Christmas carols, and Elvis's mother would sit out in the kitchen by the hour, looking through the service door at the electrified tree and the plush carpeting and the new blond, saber-legged chairs from Goldsmith's Department Store as if none of it were really hers.

Over the next 20 years, the inside of Graceland changed continually with the tides of fad and fashion: various white and gold phases, the infamous Polynesian-moderne episode commemorated in the Jungle Room den, and a hideous crimson-regal interlude, during which Elvis had the misfortune to die. There is even a posthumous period, coinciding with the start of escorted Graceland tours, when ex-wife Priscilla redid the public rooms in a tasteful teal and crystal mode that had probably never actually existed before 1982. But through it all – through the vicissitudes of crystal and fake fur and ceramic monkeys – the exterior remained virtually unchanged. It still spoke of a mythic South, a holy, American myth, a movie myth that Elvis Presley had come to represent. No matter that, in 1962 and 1963, suburbia finally caught up with Graceland and stranded it in a neon strip that stretches along U.S. 51 from Memphis to the Mississippi line. Elvis liked fast food and fast cars and deep-pile carpet and all the rest of the shiny stuff they sold in the stores that lined the highway soon to be known as Elvis Presley Boulevard. The bright lights and the easy money were part of the myth, too – and part of the modern South.

By 1965, Mrs. Moore's old pergola had fallen into ruin. A member of the Presley retinue, whose brother-in-law had been hired to reconstruct the rose garden and build an electrified waterfall in the den, remembers a crumbling birdbath and four tottering columns "which looked as though they were about to fall."⁸ Originally rescued from a fine old Memphis house, the columns were now

worked into the design for what Elvis called his Meditation Garden. Like Mrs. Moore, the current occupant of Graceland needed a place of private refuge that could not be seen from the road, a place to think, to read his Bible, and dream. But nobody thought of hiring an architect. Instead, contractor Bernie Grenadier reset the columns in a curved peristyle, backed by a rough brick wall framing stained-glass windows. The structure enclosed an automated fountain with 14 separate sprays illuminated by a spectrum of colored lights. For a Christmas present in 1966, "the guys," his so-called Memphis Mafia, gave the boss a big stone statue of a welcoming Jesus, his arms outstretched over the old columns, the new fountain, and the stately Southern mansion. It became Elvis Presley's tombstone little more than a decade later, in 1977. He was buried in the modernized wreckage of Mrs. Moore's pergola and so became part of Graceland forever.

Like Tara, Graceland was to rise again through the stewardship of another determined if more heavily mascaraed woman, one with the sort of pluck that Scarlett would have admired. Elvis's widow invested \$500,000 of his estate's liquid assets, together with \$60,000 in advance ticket sales, to reopen the house as a tourist attraction in 1982. Since then, with an inevitability one seldom finds in matters of popular taste, it has become the nation's second most visited home, surpassed only by the White House, which does not want for columns either. ■

1 Max H. Furbringer, *Domestic Architecture* (Memphis, privately printed, 1916), p. 7.

2 Eugene J. Johnson and Robert D. Russell, Jr., *Memphis: An Architectural Guide* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1940), p. 352 and passim.

3 "Scarlett O'Hara's Family Home," *House and Garden*, November 1939, p. 29.

4 Furbringer, *Domestic Architecture*, p. 31.

5 Quoted in David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), p. 93.

6 "Mansion Fit for a (Rock 'n Roll) King," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 28 March 1957.

7 This oft-quoted remark appears in Albert Goldman, *Elvis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 10.

8 See Alan Fortas, *Elvis, From Memphis to Hollywood* (Ann Arbor: Popular Culture Ink, 1992), p. 212.