



Sandwiching in History Tour

Orval E. Faubus House

640 Governor Road, Huntsville

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Hi! I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. For today's Sandwiching in History tour, we're in Madison County for the first time in the twenty-five-year history of this tour program. We're in Huntsville at the Orval Faubus House. Despite its associations with the former governor, this house is actually more important for its architecture. It was designed by important architect E. Fay Jones, and it's a fantastic example of the Organic style for which he is most widely known. So let's go have a look at this house.

A steep, craggy hill called Governor's Hill rises over the eastern portion of Huntsville. Arkansas's eighth governor, Isaac Murphy, once lived here. About 1946, a local man named Orval Faubus bought the property. Faubus himself became governor in 1955 and served 12 years in the position. In his final years in office, as he began eyeing a Senate run to follow up his time as governor, he commissioned a grand house to be built for himself on Governor's Hill, where he could entertain political dignitaries.

This masterpiece of architectural design is the result. Completed in 1967, the Faubus house is 7,350 square feet of cavernous rooms and intimate spaces suited for both private living and lavish entertaining. Faubus's subsequent political ambitions never materialized, and he only lived in this home sporadically over the next twenty years before selling it in 1989. The house remains the same today as it looked when it was built 55 years ago, and the breathtaking structure still conveys the brilliance of the architect who conceived it.

Faubus hired a talented architect named E. Fay Jones to design the house. Jones was the chair of the department of architecture at the University of Arkansas and would later become the first dean of the U of A School of Architecture. Over a ten-year career up to that point, Jones had established a national reputation for innovative residential designs. He was a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright and remained true to the principles of organic architecture throughout his career, while refining his own interpretation of the architectural philosophy. Jones would later go on to achieve international acclaim for the Thorncrown Chapel in Eureka Springs and would be awarded the AIA Gold Medal by the American Institute of Architects for a lifetime of distinguished achievement, the highest award the AIA bestows on individual architects.

Though the Faubus House came relatively early in Jones's career, it nevertheless demonstrates Jones's mastery of his art and the expression of his design philosophy that he adhered to in every work. According to Jones, organic architecture should arise as a natural solution to the problem presented, that is "the program, the site, orientation, and the materials to be used."¹ In this case, Faubus had commissioned a residence worthy of his political stature and capable of entertaining guests. The site was a hilltop that dropped away in a sheer rocky cliff. The resulting house is a structure built of simple, natural materials, fully suited to its functions while beautifully integrated into its Ozark surroundings.

The eastern elevation greets the arriving visitor with a long, low roofline and deeply overhanging eaves, effectively capping the edge of the hilltop. With the extreme length of the house—214 feet—the first impression is of strong horizontal dominance, as one would find with Frank Lloyd Wright. But Jones incorporates vertical elements like stone columns, windows, wood panels, and battens that rhythmically punctuate the linear progression—as trees might do in a landscape—and in places draw the eye up to visually climb the layered levels of overlapping hipped and gabled roof planes to the massive chimney stacks perched atop the roof peaks like boulders. It's in the second story where the vertical columns break free of their encasing walls and rise through vast panes of glass that give glimpses of soaring spaces inside that open all the way up to the sky and trees showing through from the opposite side of the home. This is a dominant theme in the Faubus house—Jones's organic architecture not only takes its cues from the surrounding nature, but intentionally invites it in, blurring the boundaries between indoors and outdoors.

The home's entrance tucked under the low eave around the corner from the carport is modest and inviting. Decorative detailing is consistent from the outside in, another clue to the

¹ (Nichols and Barry 1999, 9)

philosophy of the architecture. Located in the middle of the long house, this main entrance gives access to the private quarters to the left and the public entertaining spaces to the right.

That's where this house opens to its grandest extent. In the large living room and dining room space, the ceiling vaults upward through open beams while the stone floor steps downward and reaches out the back glass wall to jut out over the cliff edge and meet the treetops swaying in the breeze. An impressive area, perfect for hosting.

Throughout the Faubus House, every room and every corner, every nook and every vista are thoughtfully integrated by Jones for a dynamic interplay between structural elements, spaces, lighting, and ornamentation; this is especially evident on a large scale in the living room / dining room. Every angle of perspective surprises by revealing new relationships and unexpected views. Forms and motifs repeat on both the macro and micro level. With stone floors and columns, and wooden beams and battens crisscrossing overhead, it doesn't take much to imagine you are in a natural space, like a wooded grotto. Daylight floods in from multiple angles and levels and casts a changing mood as it fluctuates with the weather or time of day. Even the smallest detailing plays to the theme; this decorative motif, when backlit, gives a similar effect to mottled sunlight glinting through foliage.

In the dining room, glass portions of the wall and the mirror in the china cabinet make it hard to tell what's a view out and what's just a reflection. The ceiling, for example, is not reflected; that's a continuous view out to the ceiling of the carport.

The kitchen environment creates an instant contrast by its low ceiling and narrow space. It is well laid out. Those who have used it say everything is in the right spot. It has plenty of cabinets, the handles of which are built into the design. And in keeping with the need to host large gatherings, there are four ovens!

Off the kitchen, a small breakfast nook sits practically on the terrace, separated from an identical outdoor space by nothing but glass walls. Jones didn't just design the house, he designed the furnishings too, like this table and chairs, as well as other furniture pieces throughout the home.

On the other side of the double fireplace from the main living room is the den, a more intimate living area, but just as impressive and scenic. Here and throughout the house, the stone in the chimney, columns, and walls was sourced locally. Tucked away in a passage between the rooms is a library and a hidden storage area for firewood.

A small door in the hall wall leads to narrow stairs that run up to a unique, open loft-style room that looks out onto the other rooms of the north part of the house. This space was for Orval Faubus's wife, Alta. It was her gift-wrapping room, and it easily has the best views in the house.

Back down in the main living room, French doors in the west wall lead out to the signature feature of this house—a thirty-foot long catwalk extending out over the edge of the bluff. It is

fully cantilevered and puts a person in the midst of the treetops, almost hovering in mid-air over a long drop below, for a very unique way of experiencing nature. When the house was built, the hillside was not forested, and the catwalk overlooked the Huntsville town square.

The railing along the catwalk also edges a cantilevered stone-paved terrace that runs the entire length of the western side of the house. The balusters are made of steel arranged in a vertical pattern that appears to drip below the bottom of the terrace and catwalk. As if to confirm and complete the marriage of nature and architecture, calthemite stalactites have formed on the concrete underside of the catwalk, echoing the pattern of the steel balusters.

Most of the rest of the spaces in the Faubus house are more private in nature. From the main entrance, turning left, you see the long hallway with storage cabinets and windows down the left side and private rooms on the right.

The first one is Alta's sewing room. It opens to the hallway and living room, but the window panels can close for full privacy. All the rooms look out to the terrace and beyond through floor-to-ceiling walls of glass, and through the corners they peek at one another too. In fact, these are doors—two in each room—accessing the terrace. No matter where you are in the home, you're never far from the outdoors. This vast house has 28 exterior doorways!

The rest of the hallway can be closed off behind shoji-type doors to separate the public and private areas of the home. Two bedrooms with en suite bathrooms alternate with a guest restroom and a laundry room respectively in such a way that their ceilings open to one another through panes of glass in order to share one skylight for every three rooms. It's an ingenious way of achieving visual spillover between otherwise private spaces, in keeping with the character of a house that seeks to transcend boundaries.

Again, Jones planned even the smallest details. As throughout the house, there is no metal hardware for cabinets, and even the towel racks are custom wood designs. The bedrooms have identical footprints, but their layouts differ. Since most of the furniture is built-in, this was intentional. One bedroom has a panel in the wall by the bed that can open to the hallway to allow food or other service items to be handed in. It would be a perfect arrangement for quarantining while sick.

Another set of shoji doors can be used to close off the master bedroom and bathroom, which are far grander than their counterparts. The master bathroom is a set of spirally arranged chambers open to one another in a vaulted ceiling with a skylight. The dark mahogany below, with a partial dropped ceiling just above head level, and the lighter walls and vault above, accentuated with thin battens and filled with daylight pouring in, offers a cozy cave-like feeling.

The adjacent master suite is a massive open space with the sleeping area at one end and a lounge area at the other end, three steps down. Occupying the second of the two east-west axes that intersect the north-south length of the house, this room is a slightly smaller echo of the living room / dining room space. Being located at one of these points in the house where

multiple roof levels come together with glass in the gable ends layered over a hipped roof, it provides a complex and interesting ceiling with light coming through second-story windows. As with the living room, there is a fireplace in this room that shares a chimney with the fireplace in the adjacent room. Each of the four fireplaces in the house is different, though; this one's mantel is a single huge stone.

A door off the bedroom leads to Faubus's office area, which has a separate entrance from the outside for the business guests that Orval would meet. Alta didn't want to be bothered by them. This room features built-in seating, a built-in library, and a fireplace with a mantel that Jones sculpted by hand out of concrete. Behind the library, a built-in ladder leads up to a tiny tucked-away loft nook that would be perfect for quiet reading, and which overlooks the office, the master bedroom, and the yard.

Exiting through any of the many glass doors at this end of the house, you come out to the southern terrace. There is a hidden storage area here, surrounded by stone walls, and a built-in pond with a gas flame feature that has never been used. The use of multi-level stone terraces and planters leading up to the low roof slope visually grounds the home on the boulder-bestrewn hilltop.

On the north end of the house, a similar stone terrace integrates the architecture with the landscape as it descends through multiple levels, fading to a stone pathway along the ground, which in turn leads to a stone stairway through a cleft in the bluff, all the way down to the forest floor far below the house. The steps were built as part of the overall house project and further join the home to its surroundings.

Every detail and feature of the Faubus House was thoughtfully designed and finished with a high degree of precision. Yet the materials and methods used in the construction were relatively basic, and none of the workers who built it had more than a high school education. The result was a masterpiece that Faubus was extremely proud of, and which still exquisitely showcases the brilliant architectural legacy of E. Fay Jones.

The Orval E. Faubus House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2019 and is being carefully maintained to preserve this historic treasure. The current owner purchased the house in 1995 and envisions it being open to the public and becoming part of the fabric of the regional community.

I hope you've enjoyed this tour of the Faubus House in Huntsville. And now I want to invite you to join us in Little Rock next month for an in-person tour of the Fraternal section of the Oakland and Fraternal Cemetery. It's a historic African American cemetery with some noteworthy people buried here. And yes, pandemic permitting, we are planning to hold this tour on-site, in-person! We'll be here at noon on Friday, August 5th, and we hope to see you then!

For more information about the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, go to [ArkansasPreservation.com](https://www.arkansaspreservation.com).

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