

The Architectural Significance of Poplar Forest

The octagonal villa at Poplar Forest was not only a necessary retirement retreat for Jefferson, but also a mature, personal work meant for his own inspiration and pleasure. Considered Jefferson's most idealistic and perfect work of architecture, the restored villa provides the heretofore missing link between Monticello and his last great work, the University of Virginia. Similarities link these works, but they are also all very different. Monticello had been the great 40-year experiment and the University was a public institution. Poplar Forest can be considered a mature "melting pot" of architecture, consisting of ideas and design features collected by Jefferson over his lifetime.

The concept of a villa retreat goes back to ancient Rome and to examples from the Italian Renaissance. Jefferson modeled Poplar Forest on Andrea Palladio's modern 16th-century Italian villas and faithfully followed Palladio's proportional rules for creating correct classical buildings. The high middle cube room at Poplar Forest made it a type of rotunda house styled after Palladio's famous Villa Rotunda. Jefferson also imitated Palladio's use of attached service wings that connected and nestled into the earth, leaving the landscape for designed gardens.

However, Jefferson improved upon Palladio's wings by inventing a hidden roof system that allowed for a usable deck on top. The east wing would have been connected to the decorative flanking mounds in a unique landscape and architectural design that mimicked a five-part Palladian composition.

Jefferson also used ideas from the modern British architects of the 18th century, most notably the octagonal shape of the house and the south portico's use of arches, columns and pediment. Jefferson was very influenced by the modern buildings he saw in Europe. Extra-large windows, a skylight, bed alcoves, innovative fireplaces and European-style polished oak floors made Poplar Forest an unusually modern work for America. One of the few non-family members to visit the villa, Englishman George Flower, recognized the non-American nature of the house and said it was like a French chateau.

Jefferson was one of the first American architects in the true sense of that word and his personal style of architecture has even been given the name "Jeffersonian Classicism."