



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*

Thomas Jefferson's Architecture

By Travis McDonald

Thomas Jefferson was a self-taught architect who fully absorbed the knowledge and systems of classical design as taught through Renaissance architects such as Andrea Palladio. Jefferson first produced a studied and academic essay of the classical orders in his first domestic work, his home Monticello, integrating theories of domestic planning and landscape design into a remarkable creation for its time and place in Virginia. Five years in Europe in the 1780s expanded Jefferson's architectural education through exposure to modern neoclassical works, primarily French, through theories of picturesque landscape design, and by visiting ancient Roman buildings. Jefferson's design of the Virginia State Capitol, the first modern government building designed in a classical temple form, is indicative of Jefferson's goal to "improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them its praise." Jefferson's role in shaping a new republic extended to producing a symbolic new architecture of public buildings. His last symbolic public work was the University of Virginia. Jefferson's body of design, reflected in over 700 surviving drawings, ranges from pieces of silver and garden pavilions, to cities and the design of towns across the unexplored American continent. Jefferson returned from France to rebuild Monticello in a personal way that combined the most modern rational ideas of interior planning, technology and convenience with the adapted forms of classical Roman architecture, as learned from Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio and the British Palladian architects of the eighteenth century. The result was an American form of neoclassicism. While Monticello was Jefferson's lifelong "essay in architecture," Poplar Forest became his mature and final work of an idealistic and even more personal blend of architectural concepts. Jefferson's domestic influence is seen in the work of his builders he mentored and who became competent designers.

The significance of Thomas Jefferson's architecture is so well established it would be hard to find a history of early American architecture that did not describe the importance, power, and symbolism of his work. Jefferson's new type of American private house has been described as a necessary comparative touchstone for anyone writing about American domestic architecture (Upton 1998). Similarly, his new kind of American public building (Virginia Capitol, University of Virginia, and his influence on early federal buildings) bestows on him the title of father of American symbolism in public architecture (Gelernter 1999). Jefferson has long been considered the father of American Classicism (Kimball, 1916). Histories of world architecture are just as likely to mention Jefferson's work when describing neoclassicism or American architecture (Jordan 1969, Fletcher 1975, Kostoff 1985). In histories of fundamental building types, Jefferson's buildings also appear in American or International books ((Maddex 1985, Pevsner 1976). A random sampling of most architectural libraries would document the range of Jefferson's talents in a number of areas: international histories of architectural theory (Kruft 1994), dictionaries of architecture (Sturgis 1905, Pevsner 1966, Curl 1999), books on master builders (Roth 1983, Maddex 1985), books on landscape architects (Nichols 1978, Tishler 1989, Martin 1991),

histories of city planning (White 1962, Craig 1978), works on American building technology (Fitch 1966, Peterson 1976, Lerley 1999), and in decorative arts (Thornton 1984, Cooper 1993). A survey of prominent books on neo-classicism demonstrates an even broader range of discussion of Jefferson's work (Honour 1968, Rykwert 1980, Tavernor 1991, Irwin 1997). Jefferson's style of neoclassicism was so personal that some architectural style books define it as "Jeffersonian Classicism," one of the very few American styles to be named after its architect (Whiffen 1969, Poppeliers 1976).

It is not surprising that the "most extensive eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century architectural library" in America (Hefertepe, 2001) belonged to Thomas Jefferson (Jefferson also owned the largest and finest private general library in the United States). The extensive description of Jefferson's architecture in the 1987 World Heritage Listing adequately describes the "immortality" and worldwide honors for Jefferson's architecture. Since that time the Oxford Dictionary of Architecture (Curl 1999) stated that "The University is arguably the most beautiful architectural ensemble in the American Continent," a belief consistently upheld by national professional polls conducted by the American Institute of Architects. Distinguished architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson remarked in 2006: "Jefferson is without a doubt the most important American architect." Even without expanding the list of Jefferson's interests, skills and accomplishments to the many subject areas beyond architecture and its allied arts, we begin to understand why he, and his surviving work, can be considered heir to both Renaissance and Enlightenment thought in the New World.