



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S *Poplar Forest*

The Universal Significance of Jefferson's Architecture

By Travis McDonald

As stated in the Jefferson Precinct Listing, Thomas Jefferson was a full and equal participant in international trends to study the classical world through languages, literature, history and philosophy. Jefferson's taste in architecture transcended beauty or style, representing universal values that he linked to an expression of a new national architecture for the United States: "...that it would be noble and free from traditions of the Old World; that it would offer infinite possibilities to the common man; and, that it would serve as a beacon for freedom and self-determination for the world." Jefferson's architecture was as symbolic as his famous literary works, speaking to the hopes for himself, his countrymen, and for the world's humanity. William Adams's statement about Monticello is as true of Poplar Forest: "No man ever lived in more civilized elegance than Jefferson. Taking his cues and inspirations from wherever he could find them in history or in contemporary experience, he strove to build a house harmonious with human dignity, the same ideal he followed in formulating the philosophy of the government."

Poplar Forest is invested with universal ideology but not as a public symbol. It is a place symbolic of the inner Jefferson, where he as an individual reaffirmed the power of the mind and of ideas to affect civilization. The Jeffersonian classicism of Poplar Forest reflects in an autobiographical way the physical expression of America inheriting from the ancient and modern world the best hope for humanity's life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson, Fiske Kimball wrote, was "the father of our national architecture." Joseph Krufft observed that "it was largely because Jefferson, as a Humanist, found his answer to the quest for a symbolic American Style in Roman and Palladian models that the country developed a particularly rigorous form of Classicism." The democratic values still associated with Jefferson's belief in human freedom and self-determination brought former Polish president Lech Walesa to Poplar Forest to pay homage and to say that the site is "holy to your nation. It's not only your property, it's the property of all civilization." In a similar tribute, former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev visited Poplar Forest during Jefferson's 250th anniversary in 1993 and spoke of the site as a place for people to have a memory and therefore a history. He described the anniversary event not as a national event but an international celebration. Jefferson, he said, "is still a magnet capable of attracting the hearts and minds of new generations." In this associated way, Poplar Forest is a powerful and spiritual place where people personally connect with intangible and abstract ideals.

Jefferson's design of Poplar Forest as a villa grew out of his personal program of ideological goals. In giving shape to his architectural and ideological ideals, Jefferson gave shape to universal human concerns as well. Ackerman notes that "the social underpinning of the villa culture [was] more consistent than that of any other social manifestation in Western society over the same period." From the bright, perfectly proportioned middle room of Poplar Forest, described as "the ideal of human reason rendered in space," and outward into the landscape, the site reflects the Age of

Reason's debate concerning man's role in nature and, conversely, nature's impact on man. Jefferson's unique ensemble of architecture and landscape reflected his own answer: a harmonious balance with nature. Wills recognized this union when he observed that "Poplar Forest was Jefferson's last dramatic marriage of classical art with the American wilderness." Jefferson's idealistic design concept, to some, is comparable to a universal ideal cosmology. This was best summarized by Vincent Scully in associating the Vitruvian "Man of Perfect Proportions" with Poplar Forest: "This figure dominated European aesthetics from Antiquity through the Renaissance with its vision of an heroic mankind proportionally in accord with the ideal shapes of circle and square. The image shaped the great French gardens of the seventeenth century, which Jefferson loved so well. It was their *pourtraiture*, their revelation of humanity's position in the center of the universe, which seems to emerge as Jefferson's final intention at Poplar Forest."

These ideal shapes and associated features constituted a private, simplified, retreat for a remarkable man of the Enlightenment- a physical place for his intellectual universe. After contributing so much in public life, Thomas Jefferson resumed his private existence as an individual at Poplar Forest, away from the distractions at Monticello. Poplar Forest represented his own pursuit of happiness late in life. At Poplar Forest, Jefferson turned back to studying the classics to recapture inspiration from early heroes who had sustained and shaped his intellect. He characterized his personal study during retirement with a renewed joy: "I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier. I read nothing, therefore, but of the heroes of Troy, of the wars of Lacedaemon and Athens, of Pompey and Caesar, and of Augustus too...I slumber without fear, and review in my dreams the visions of antiquity." The ages-old stimulus of a retreat refreshed Jefferson's own mind to prepare for one last idealistic and symbolic public work, the University of Virginia, where he hoped the development of the human mind would provide the freedom to shape a better world, just as his own had done.