

A CASE STUDY ACROSS SCALES: HEURISTIC MODELS OF INTIMACY AND IMMENSITY

A CASE STUDY ACROSS SCALES: Heuristic Models of Intimacy and Immensity

Villa, Village, Vastness:

Monticello, The Academical Village, and Thomas Jefferson's Visions of a Transcontinental Nation

A Voice From Within

- A shard of mica in a boy's small hand can reflect and magnify a dwelling as a covenant with the world;
- the now defunct cavernous Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. first served an adolescent citizen to imagine American cultural history in dialogue with the immensity of a New World Arcadia; and
- a Cabinet of Curiosities prefaced the geological and archeological origins of Mr. Jefferson's hobby of his old age: the Academical Village as an eschatological vision: Noah's Ark in the Garden of Eden serving as threshold to the Vastness of America.²⁰

Villa

I often spread rumors that the elegantly long-limbed adolescent Thomas Jefferson, at the time of his father's death, sat under an immense centennial oak on Mount Alto and gazed down on his dear diminutive Monticello hilltop fingering a shard of mica encrusted gneiss rock. There and then Jefferson dreamed, as here and now I echo, the lens of a 360-degree vision of work as life, both as a gardener and engineer at the thickened edge of both topographic and archeological imaginations, terms borrowed from Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (1995) referring to his childhood autobiographical origins in England. These haunted visions were realized by Jefferson over a 50-year project commencing with a villa on a mountaintop, followed by an Academical Village on the remains of an abandoned agriculturally wasted site, what Walter Lippmann in *A Preface to Morals* calls "barren ground." This vast project was to be realized over the next century in advocating the ground rules of the Cartesian grid projected first in the 1785 Land Ordinance (Fig. 1) across the vastness of a continental nation.

For some decades now, I have remained a stranger, a curious field guide, conjuring up spatial tales of origin in dialogue with a specific heroic citizen of a New World Arcadia. At the scales of an un-private dwelling, a public university and a continental imagination, Jefferson braids traces of Eden and the promise of the *Aeneid*, which is the heroic project of the new city, to the continental immensity of the American Imagination.



Composition 1: Scalar Reverberations from Cabinet to Continent

This eye-witnessed speculation might be modeled after books of displacement and resilience, found in either James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and/or William Saroyan's *A Human Comedy*. The former is about here and there, now and then across vastly displaced continents, and the latter is about the haunted narrative of a small boy, Ulysses MacCauley, seeing the world from the modest horizons of his backyard in Ithaca, California.

Thomas Jefferson was a very big man with transcontinental landscapes read at the scale of Monticello, and reconsidered in his last institution known as the University of Virginia.

In my self-designated station as guide to Jefferson traveling in the company of seminal characters, nomad and a lunatic: first emerging from the armature of Princeton, taking my initial determined steps from Princeton, again syncopating between the armatures of Boston and Paris, accelerating onto the vastness of India, and of Babel resurrected in Dubai. Again and again, Enlightenment mindset, along with Immanuel Kant and John Locke's reflections on the ethics of difference.

All the while, I attend to whether or not architecture can be a language of the world.²¹ In my years as a guide, I repeatedly call and response, if not almost cacophony through the congested rooms of a remarkable building.

When I was coincidentally 13 mining mica in a math test by pulling out Volume M of *The Cabinet of Curiosities*, I came across a photograph of Monticello, with the inscription sunset over Wald Hall. This finding was agenda linked to a fictional, if not heuristic, from my Heritage book series of heroic Americans who dwell the majority of my adult life in Jefferson's house, excavated deep into the Piedmont condition of way of consuming Virginia's deep red clay to nurtured both body and soul if not given voice. As I now guide you through Jefferson's whimsical hearing device in dialogue with the pace of the world.

Since turning thirteen, I have also tried to see Jefferson's house, transforming from inside to outside, recurrent dualities. Jefferson planted seeds in the garden to be reviewed again in multiple documents stored Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* of the world, never would have conceded to Walter Benjamin that America was eventually to become barbers rather than enduring farmers. Jefferson for the eschatological capacity for resilience, I remind strangers and students, as well as told William Stephens Smith in 1787 that, "I have been in the same breath, I remind my interlocutors of the cacophonous company of near contemporaries like David Thoreau. Wary of overextending my role, I would be equally engaged today with more modest condition such as Robert Harrison and Simon

and Immensity

transcontinental Nation



verberations from Cabinet to Continent

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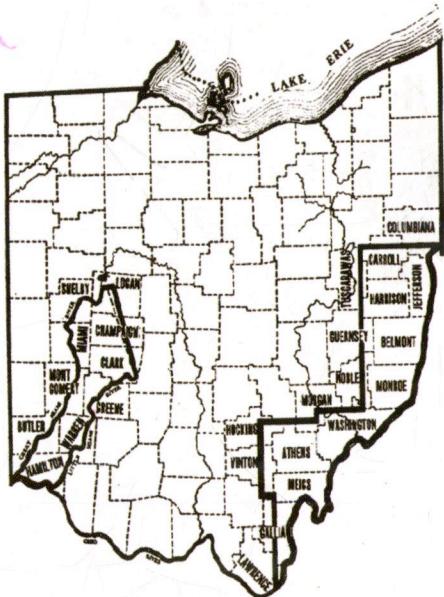
Thomas Jefferson was a very big man with appetites and agencies for transcontinental landscapes read at the scales of his first architectural project, Monticello, and reconsidered in his last institutional project, the Academical Village known as the University of Virginia.

In my self-designated station as guide to Jefferson's works, I recount my time traveling in the company of seminal characters of this narrative: a surveyor, a nomad and a lunatic: first emerging from the depths of mica mines in Manhattan, taking my initial determined steps from Princeton to Peru, then pausing again and again syncopating between the armatures of Rome and the labyrinths of Venice, accelerating onto the vastness of India, and most recently observing the Towers of Babel resurrected in Dubai. Again and again, I am inspired by Jefferson's Enlightenment mindset, along with Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime and John Locke's reflections on the ethics of dialogue between friends and strangers.

All the while, I attend to whether or not architecture forms a covenant with the world.²¹ In my years as a guide, I repeatedly explore distance and eventual echo, call and response, if not almost cacophony of strangers seeking to journey through the congested rooms of a remarkable, larger than life, New World citizen.

When I was coincidentally 13 mining mica in Manhattan, I pretended to study for a math test by pulling out Volume M of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (1956) and came across a photograph of Monticello, which I then traced adding seagulls and the inscription sunset over Wald Hall. This factual trace marked a fluid temporal agenda linked to a fictional, if not heuristic, sense of place. I knew of Jefferson from my Heritage book series of heroic Americans, but never conceived I would dwell the majority of my adult life in Jefferson's Virginia in a modest shelter excavated deep into the Piedmont condition. Twenty-five years of nourishment by way of consuming Virginia's deep red clay through my Parcel X orchards, I have nurtured both body and soul if not given voice to Jefferson's *lessons of the Lawn*²² as I now guide you through Jefferson's whispered echoes, serving as a surrogate hearing device in dialogue with the pace of his hand and the depth of his vision.

Since turning thirteen, I have also tried to see the world anew through Monticello, Jefferson's house, transforming from inside out and upside down, inverting recurrent dualities. Jefferson planted seeds of endurance in his thousand-foot long garden to be reviewed again in multiple dome rooms above, which unsurprisingly stored Diderot & d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, in his attachment to the land, never would have conceded to Walter Lippmann's *Preface to Morals* (1929) that America was eventually to become barren ground, a rootless nation of city dwellers rather than enduring farmers. Jefferson had a pathological optimism²³ for the eschatological capacity for resilience in the name of vastness. After all, as I remind strangers and students, as well as fellow explorers, this was a man who told William Stephens Smith in 1787 that, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." But in the same breath, I remind my interlocutors that Jefferson also traveled in the cacophonous company of near contemporaries like Thomas Cole and Henry David Thoreau. Wary of overextending my reach, I extrapolate that Jefferson would be equally engaged today with more current speculators on the Arcadian condition such as Robert Harrison and Simon Schama.



SECTIONS NUMBERED
UNDER
THE LAND ORDINANCE OF MAY 20, 1785

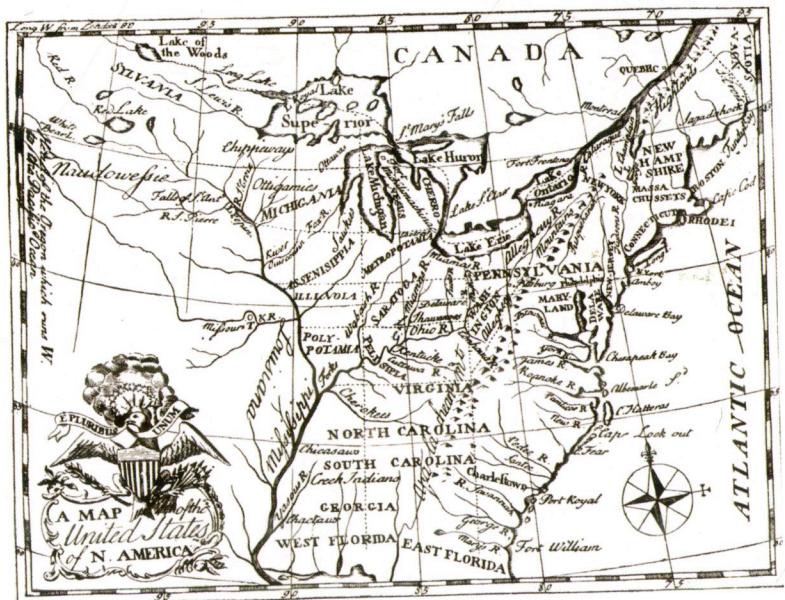


Fig.1: 1785 Land Ordinance

I recently realized on another self-guided tour at a stable altitude of 35,000 feet traveling east somewhere between D.C. and Dubai, that a nomad can keep pace with the Sun on the upper right, as a surveyor registers continents passing on the lower left, even while a lunatic in syncopation sets back the incessant pace of time, sunrise to sunrise without Moon in sight. I promise to pass on these not so random associations the next time I review Jefferson's continental map collection in his vestibule or foyer – what some might call a cabinet of curiosities where time stands still, or accelerates in the face of a vortex.

When perfect and imperfect strangers,²⁴ whom some call students, join me to visit Thomas Jefferson at the threshold of his mountaintop retreat, Monticello, they enter into a perfectly proportioned 20-foot cube. Indeed, it is a cabinet of curiosities filled with the treasures of a towering figure, 6'-3", an agent of change with Simon Schama's attribution of a topographic and archeological imagination at the scale of Arcadian immensities (Fig. 2). Trans-cultural, trans-chronological memorabilia are framed on each wall with the latest maps of the then-known four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. I point out then that they must lift their gaze to the celestial soffit above to witness an assembled deep frieze studded with life-size contemporary plaster casts of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Marquis de Lafayette as well as ancient marble busts of Aristotle, Hannibal, and Homer. This startling constellation, I insist, recalls, much to their bewilderment, Raphael's 16th-century painting, the *School of Athens*, looking down on both strangers and fellow citizens across millennia. I challenge them that James Joyce might be at home here. More often than not these fellow strangers are ready to shuffle along in disbelief.



Fig. 2: Entrance Hall, Monticello
(Thomas Jefferson Foundation/Robert Lautman)

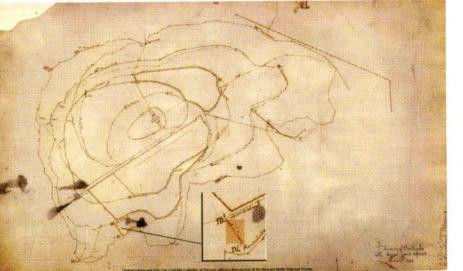


Fig. 3: House with the 1000-Foot-Long Garden
(Thomas Jefferson Site Plan Drawing)

Look, straight ahead, above the drawing room doors to the west, there is a buffalo hide pictograph of the Mandan Native American Chiefs given to the Jefferson sponsored Lewis & Clark Expedition, mapping the mighty, bigger than big, watersheds of the future continental nation: the Missouri flowing from the Northwest Rockies and the Mississippi flowing from the northeast Appalachians to enrich the great plains; later figured in the Lawn, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, immortalized as *PrairyErth* by William Least Heat Moon.

I try to enter from the east at sunrise on the equinox, when one is greeted by a reclining sphinx, a statue of Ariadne, Hellenic goddess of architecture, guarding the fireplace beneath a basalt pyramid and flanking obelisks above the mantel on this southern wall. "What could be more Modern than the Archaic?" Sanford Kwinter has remarked. These guests, no longer strangers, are getting used to

evidence of disorienting yet recurrent dualities. Opposite, to the north, are cases of pre-historic mastodon fossils and contemporary moose, elk, and white tail deer antlers freshly presented by Lewis & Clark in 1805.

Once greeted by this host of heroes, if these guests would look back from whence they came, as if to orient themselves with the known world, into the glare of sunrise before sojourning beyond this cabinet, they would, more often than not, remark on the iridescent glow of the Sun illuminating Jefferson's Sea (Jefferson was proud to declare that there was a vast uninterrupted view from his front door at Monticello all the way to Portugal), which on frequent foggy days would stretch without an encumbered view. Above this view to the east, hung amid the constellation of busts, is a nineteenth-century time machine of a great seven-day clock purchased in Philadelphia. However, during installation at Monticello, Jefferson was required to cut holes in the floor to accommodate Saturday's pendulum weights. With the Sabbath in the basement, the week could start anew on Sunday by cranking the weights up to the attic to engage the weather vanes of Jefferson's invention. Ariadne smiles from below looking up to this time machine in a room where one is never alone, never no-where at the edge of the frontier, but now-here as a covenant with the world, again. Strangers now become conversant.

After the cabinet of curiosities, and tracing a labyrinthine route that followed the Sun first to the east study hall, populated now with flattened family silhouettes as opposed to heroic busts, I guide these now reverent students into Jefferson's sanctum sanctorum, his library, once containing of once 6,000 volumes in six languages, past his seed classification system of both the native and the exotic and his requisite appetites for hybridization, into his shared study and bed chamber where he had a habit of duplicating all his day correspondence while slipping into bed with the darkness of the night with an obsessive assemblage of mirrors for the Moon and the ticking of a clock's pendulum to insert regularity even into the night. Celestial soffits now multiply here where deep skylights penetrate the attic space for both the rising of the Sun to illuminate this chamber and to pierce the dining room on the opposite corner to signal the end of teatime. I help to greet strangers, lead them through instruction and then education imagining a public production space, his study, adjacent to the private bedchamber where he could roll out of bed into the distinct incongruities of work as life. I surmise that Jefferson in his long years as widower was never alone, clearly and curiously with ever more busts of contemporary correspondents peering down on his private chambers. Jefferson lived for 70 years with an extended family of, at times, 500 slaves, and it is rumored he fathered children with one of them, Sally Hemmings, the half-sister of his wife Martha who came along on their honeymoon as a personal maid. After the tearoom with again a cornucopia of illustrious guests as surrogate busts, we walk out to the dependencies to savor sherbet from the icehouse on the north and the simmering of Brunswick stew in the vast kitchens to the south. It is just high noon now and we take a brisk walk through Jefferson's immense 1,000-foot-long garden, pausing at an observatory pavilion at the edge between the Cartesian forest of orchards to the south and the vegetable garden of intentional hybridization extending east and west terminating, as the sun sets to his cemetery, where the Surveyor's Obelisk marks his grave. (Fig. 3)

- What was the site
- It was an abandoned
tobacco and corn e

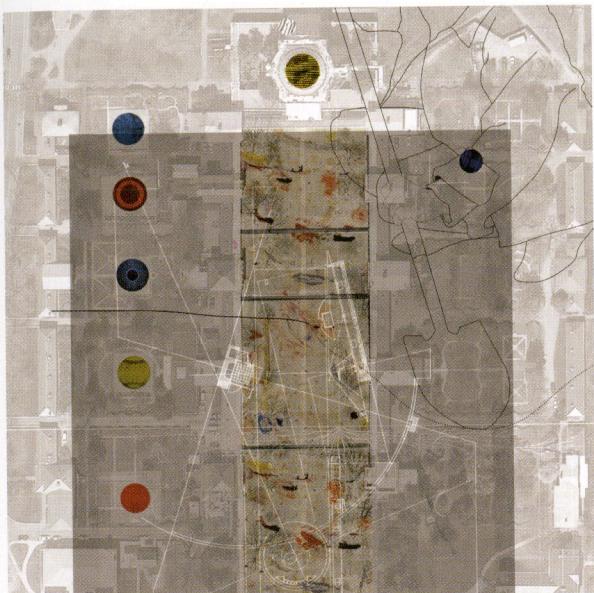
- But what came before
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- But what came before
- We encouraged one and
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Age of successive
granite and soft sand

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Jefferson's Sea (Jefferson
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Composition 2: Semper Surveys with Rod and Compass

Voices in Dialogue

- What was the site of the Academical Village?
- It was an abandoned agricultural wasteland where successive plantations of tobacco and corn exhausted the land.
- But what came before?
- We guided one another through a previous dense hardwood forest of flora and fauna, where the first people grew corn, beans, and squash in small garden plot clearings and relocated them regularly in appreciation of fallow ground as pre-conditional to eschatological renewal.
- But what came before that immense enduring forest?
- We encouraged one another that Jefferson knew his soil as he tasted it regularly, and by digging deep foundations, his geology as well, and believed that 10,000 years ago this New Dominion²⁵ was at the scarred edge of the last retreating Ice Age of successive layers of gneiss rock, the sedimentary result of layers of hard granite and soft sandstones.

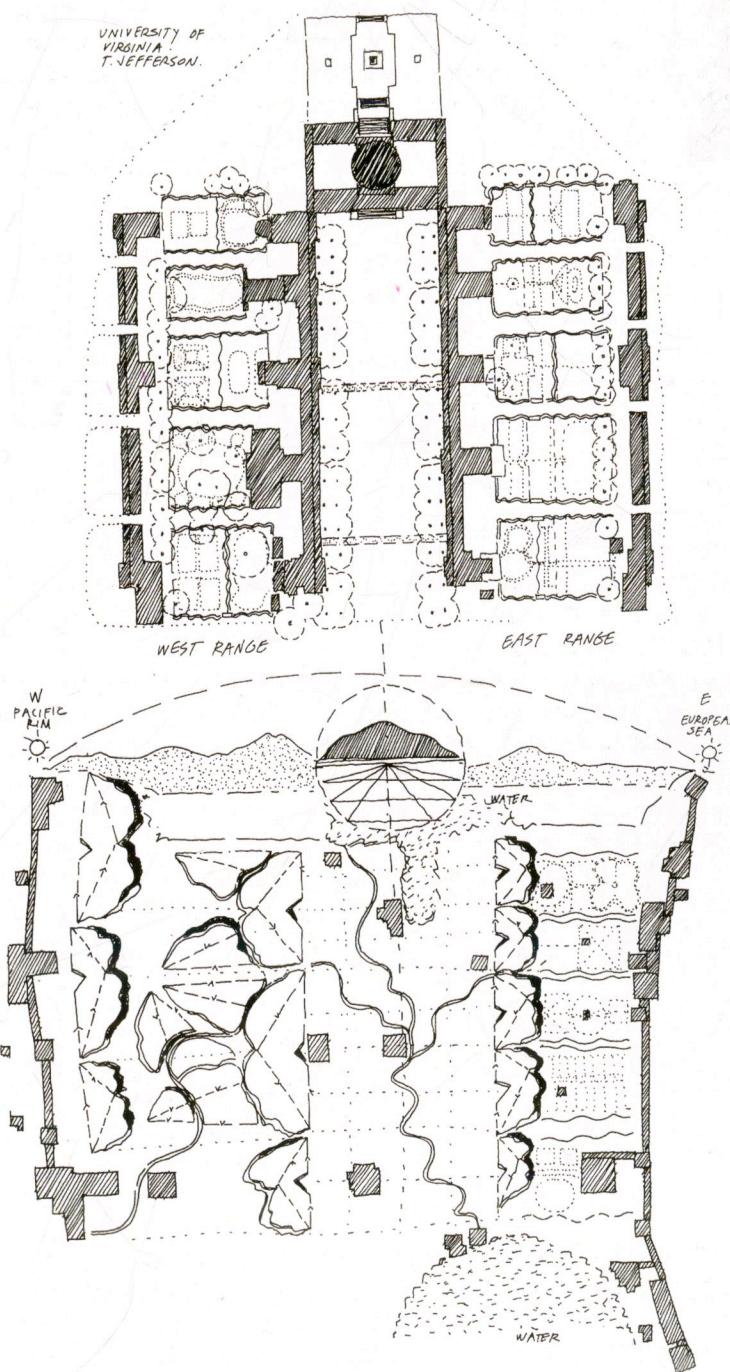


Fig. 4: William Morrish, The Democratic Range, from Civilizing Terrains: Mountains, Mounds and Mesas (Courtesy of the Author)

We pause to reflect, and then, rejuvenated by our long shadows, we decide to follow these reflections on to the Academical Village. On these occasions of student orientation, I delight in recalling my dialogues with my former-colleague, William Morrish, a fellow traveler and author of *Civilizing Terrains: Mountains, Mounds and Mesas*. (Fig. 4) William and I both delighted in inaugural events, in a dialog revealing the origins of the construction site:

Village

This is a frictional landscape of aggression and enduring scars. A memory of a vast forest, like the one that referenced the hellenic peristyles of the Acropolis, and previous appetites for minotaur as well as mastodons all hark back to geological as well as archeological imaginations. When my students look out from the Rotunda to the south they can see now the great Lawn framed by both the east and west Colonnades, reiterating the southwest mountain ranges to the east and the Blue Ridge of the Appalachians to the west. Then reflexively I ask: Where have you seen such a vast framed landscape before? They quickly make the connection to Jefferson's three-sided garden pavilion seen that day at high noon in the midst of his mountaintop garden and adjacent Cartesian forest of hybridized Albemarle Pippins.

Design research appears to these now cosmopolitan citizens to be coincidental with the Rotunda approximating Stonehenge and the Pavilions replicating the mythic profiles of Mt. Kilimanjaro transposed onto the ever shifting sands of the Egyptian desert by the shadows of the pyramids at Giza.

The concept of Jefferson's Academical Village as ideogram of a continental nation, from the East Range of the Appalachians on the Atlantic Coast to the West Range of the Rockies on the Pacific, frames the Lawn as the Great Plains, and opens up to Rebecca Solnit's advocacy of "The Blue of Distance". This vision of measuring immensity inspired Jefferson first to sponsor the Lewis & Clark Expedition, and second to support the subsequent Louisiana Purchase during his second presidential term. I call these specifications for construction an ongoing cultural dialogue between citizens & strangers guided by surveyor, nomad & lunatic some narrate as spatial tales of origin of a New World lost & found.

In one day these fellow traveling students, now explorers, realize that Jefferson had a vast sense of temporal distinction, on one hand living with uncertainties as a slave-holding farmer, and on the other giving voice to the unalienable certainties of gravity and orientation found coincidentally in the belief in the utility of a vast encyclopedia in the age of Enlightenment, some call life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Academical Village is a vast temporal project where the surveyor, nomad and lunatic are not only still relevant, but also pragmatic agents. Evening is coming on and I leave them, now dear collaborators, with one more synopsis of numbers and names of fellow travelers because the science of elective affinities on Arcadian immensity never pauses for daydreams or nightmares.

Jefferson's father, Peter, was a surveyor for King George II and acquired 5,000 acres for his services mapping the watersheds flowing east to the Atlantic from the Appalachian Range to Tidewater Virginia and Chesapeake Bay (Fig. 5). A generation later, his son rendered visible the great watersheds of the west that

made the Pacific reverse the national orientation of this former East Coast set of colonies, now framing the Sun setting across the Pacific. It is appropriate Hollywood is a fictional setting in the West haunted by Joyce's fascination with seafaring Ulysses tracing Troy to Ithaca onto Rome, if not Dublin.

I remind these expanded citizens that at the time Jefferson was constructing this Academical Village as an open-ended paradise at the edge of Arcadia, Thomas Cole, a Hudson River School painter, was commenting critically on his sequence of coincidental frictional landscapes of aggression envisioned in *The Course of Empire* (1834-36). The sequence of paintings frames the evolution of human occupation of nature. First, in the "Savage State" in which water and wind are turbulent if not wild, humankind is humbled by pre-conditions (Fig. 6). Next is the "Pastoral Setting," in which nature has been transformed now into landscape through human agency (Fig. 7), followed by "Consummation," the same setting is now transformed, timbered and quarried to construct a great city (Fig. 8). Next comes "Destruction," in which even heroically scaled statues and bridges are tumbled (Fig. 9), and, finally, "Desolation" in which now nature, as diminished or resurrected as primeval moss and parasitic vines, reclaim the earth from the mortar and marbles of Marcellus (Fig. 10). This sequential vision of a New World construction site parallels Jefferson's evolving building up and tearing down of first his villa and then his village. It is here, at the village, where we see today McKim, Meade, and White's project initiated at the time of the fire of 1895 commenced the closure of the distant view (Fig. 11) at the height of American imperialism with the construction of Cabell, Rouse and Cocke Halls marking the destruction of Jefferson's dream of openness to the blue of distance as a measure of immensity.

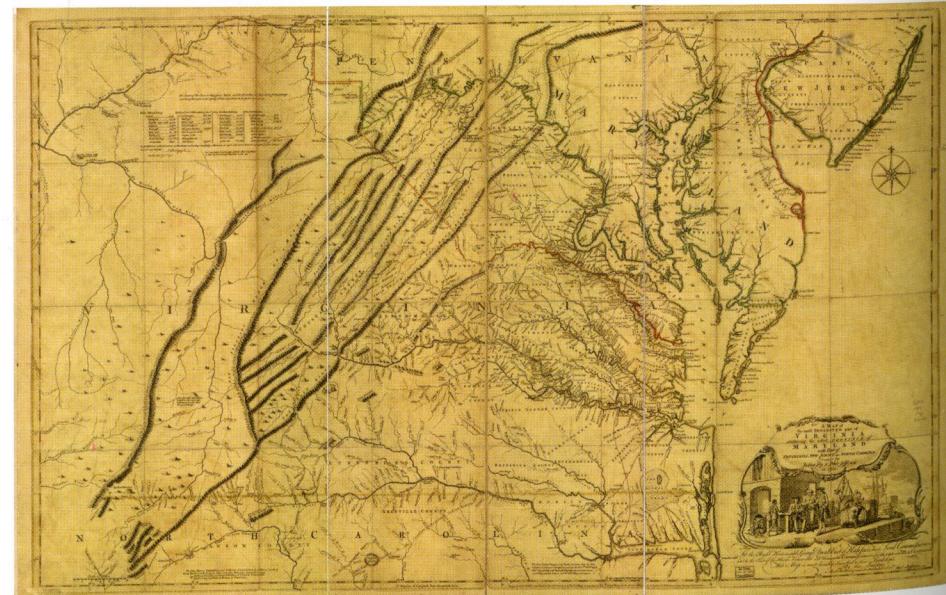
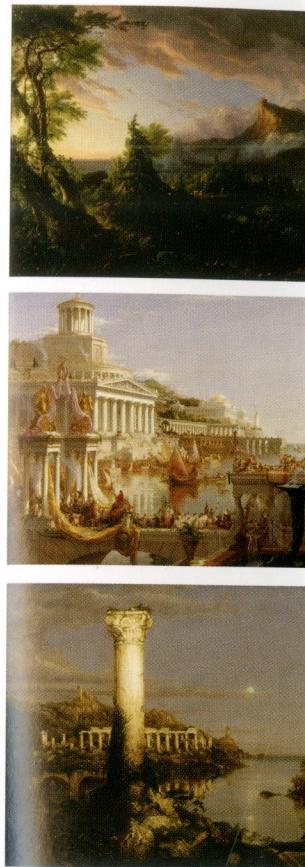


Fig. 5: Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson, Map of Virginia (1755) (Library of Congress)



Fig. 11: Map

on of this former East Coast set
cross the Pacific. It is appropriate
pointed by Joyce's fascination with
Rome, if not Dublin.

While Jefferson was constructing this
temple at the edge of Arcadia, Thomas
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Top: Fig. 6 - 10: Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire*
(From top to bottom, left to right)

Fig. 6: The Savage State (1834)
Fig. 7: The Arcadian or Pastoral State (1836)
Fig. 8: Consummation (1836)
Fig. 9: Destruction (1836)
Fig. 10: Desolation (1836)
(The Thomas Cole National Historic Site)

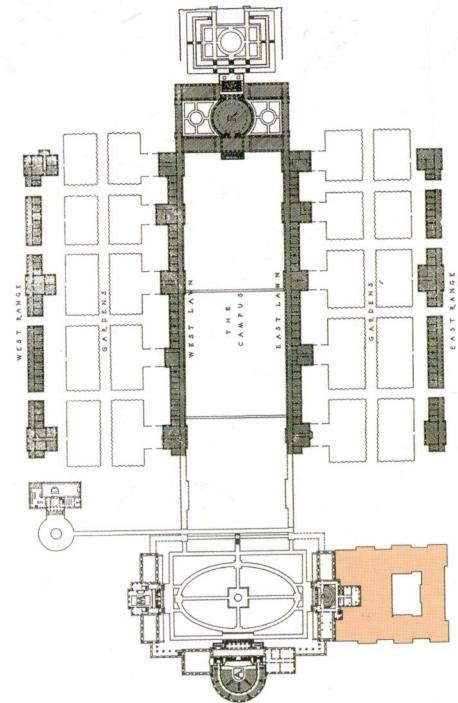
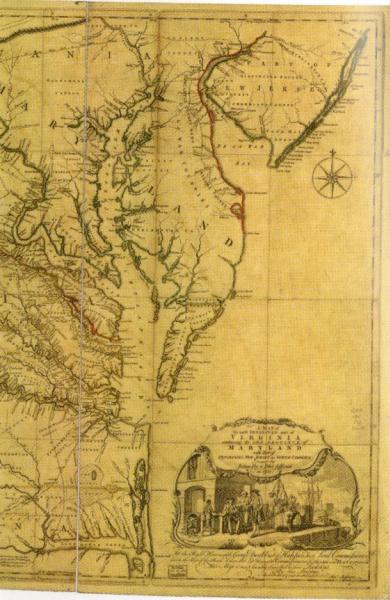


Fig. 11: Map of Central Grounds, McKim, Meade & White

Vastness

All alone, now returning to the darkened interior of the Rotunda's dome room, in this reconstructed forest edge also read outside as the colonnade, I look up and imagine the astronomical planetarium Jefferson had projected dark blue, as Bramante's *Tempietto* with etched and gilded astrological observations through the magic lantern of a camera obscura. I realize I have failed to give them some essential historical facts, ground rules, which they no doubt were expecting at the start of this tour. I email the following facts and contextual frame:

1. At the age of 13, adolescent Jefferson was bequeathed at his father's death the following: the tools of a surveyor to measure and to mark, 5,000 acres of wild and pastoral landscapes, 365 slaves and 256 books including an English translation of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture*.
2. Thereafter, Jefferson went off to study law at William & Mary, where he acquired, no doubt from library manuscripts, two engravings that he treasured all his long life: one was of Hadrian's Pantheon with colonnaded forecourt as a spatial treatise on the immensity of the universe of imperial Rome, and second the transformative project of Michelangelo's Il Campidoglio, re-orienting the ancient Roman forum in ruins to the east to the new Vatican City to the west in dialogue with civic authority.²⁶ (Fig. 12)
3. At the time of his death, July 4, 1826, Jefferson left instructions for his tombstone epithet describing himself first as the author of the Declaration of Independence, then second as author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and last as father of the University of Virginia.

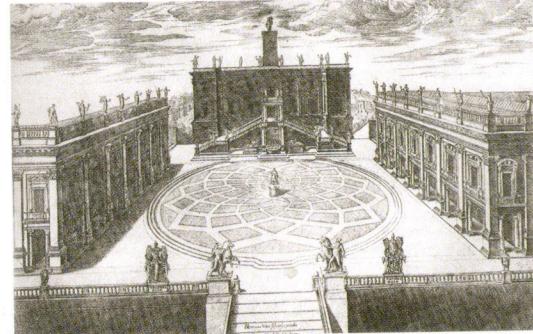
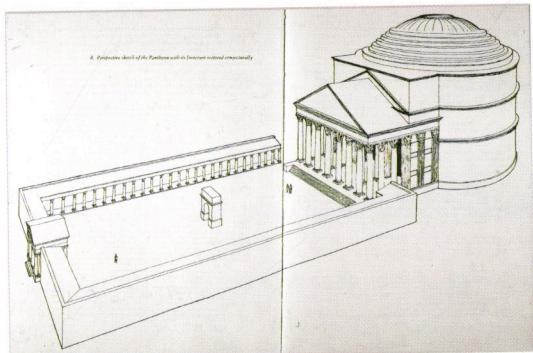


Fig. 12: Jefferson's student research on the Pantheon and Il Campidoglio

A CASE STUDY ACROSS SCALES:
HEURISTIC MODELS OF INTIMACY AND IMMENSITY

Emerging out of the Rotunda under the darkness of a new Moon, and glancing at Homer, I suddenly realize I have something in common with Virgil in service of Dante. Displaced, I had slowly become a citizen of this commonwealth as a field guide to Jefferson's immense cabinet of curiosities. I was indeed once another of Pynchon's slow learners from Manhattan, dwelling halfway between the Central Park Zoo and the Museum of Natural History, then half my life in Princeton and then another half in exile in Cincinnati and Houston. One day in 1985, I trespassed across the Mason-Dixon Line into the vast galleries of the Corcoran Gallery of (American) Art. This great treasure house had a specific exhibit: "Dialogue with Nature: Landscape and Literature in 19th Century America" framed by Cole, Church, and Bierstadt. I realized I had never been to witness the edge of the wild to the North and Far West of this nation inspired by Jefferson's launch of the Lewis & Clark Expedition. This self-guided exhibit made me aware of a broader view of American art as cultural history in relationship to the nation's ever-expansive territories. This exhibit traced the early 18th-century preoccupation with the intimacies and rituals of everyday domestic life "generations around a farm table" (Fig. 13) through to the 19th-century's awe-inspired documentation of American landscapes of immensity and celestial engagement - a theater of trans-cultural and trans-chronological imagination also revealed early on in Raphael's *School of Athens* (1512) (Fig. 14). Linear history is rewritten in this most modern painting of the Renaissance as time is in flux, connective tissues imagined in multiplicity over singularity. Jefferson's imagination, full of friction and contradictions, exists at both the scale of his ten digits and in the vast Corcoran collections of this New World. Perhaps, the necessary sensibilities of surveyors, nomads, and lunatics now assume for me, *no*, now for us, the names of Cole, Church, and Bierstadt as they guide us through the manifest destiny of American cultural landscapes. How big is big? David said to Goliath with a small pebble, or was it mica, in his slingshot.

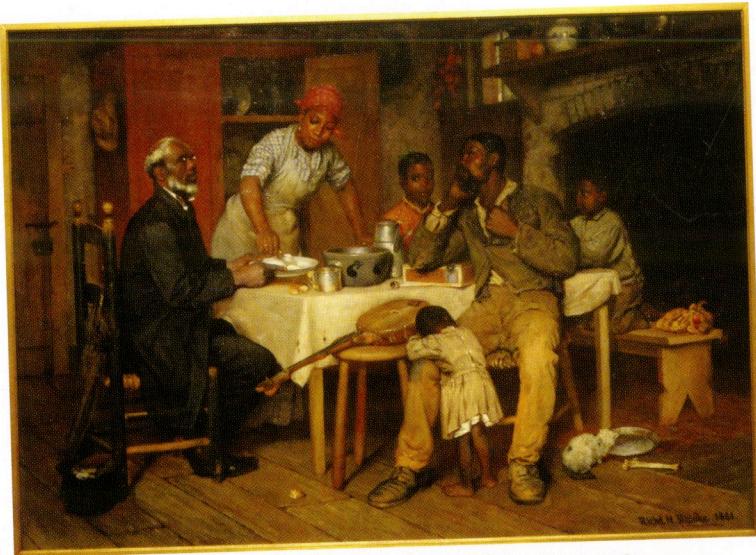


Fig. 13: A Pastoral Visit, Virginia, by Richard Norris Brooke (1881), Corcoran Collection, National Gallery of Art



Fig. 14: Raphael, The School of Athens (1510-1512)

Cole's Course of
systematically er-

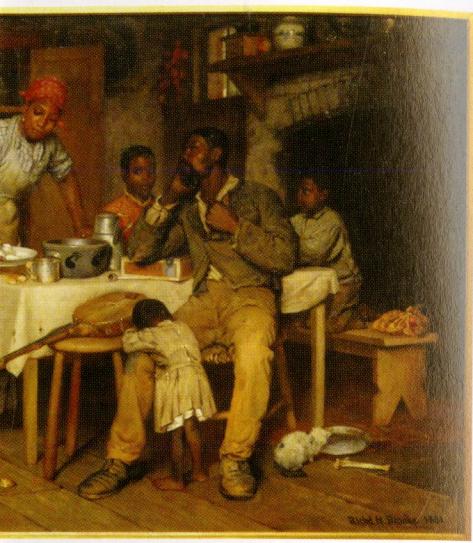
Is there, even in
found in desolate
heaven to earth?

Church's Niagara
descending water

Do we not see
on the face of the
the forces of Na
Rotunda?

Bierstadt's Mou

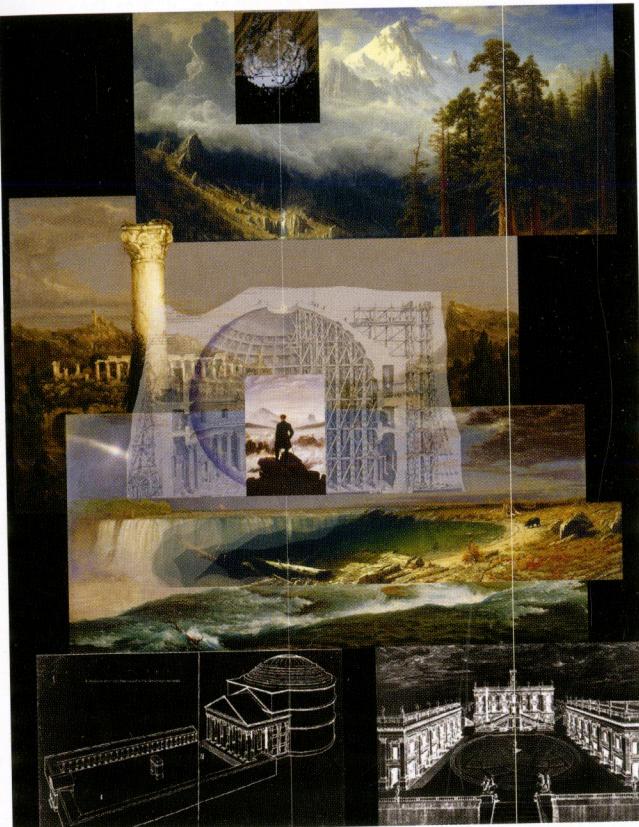
Now is this the
not a human in
still clear shallow
immense tumult



a, by Richard Norris Brooke (1881), Corcoran Art



f Athens (1510-1512)



Composition 3: The Lawn as Lens Connecting Rome to the Rockies

Voices from Without

Cole's *Course of the Empire* (1836) serves a surveyor's five finger exercise systematically envisioning *Genesis* to *Exodus*.

Is there, even in diminished, depleted water and sky, an eschatological leitmotiv found in desolation in the resistive column of light and fragile vine, which connects heaven to earth?

Church's *Niagara Falls* (1856) is a nomad's reductive oasis reducing the world into descending water and tempestuous sky.

Do we not see Jefferson's inverted attic oculus where God's countenance was on the face of the earth, or is it the reason why Enlightenment's fascination with the forces of Natural Science are explored specifically in the basement of the Rotunda?

Bierstadt's *Mount Corcoran* (1876) is perhaps the most immense vision.

Now is this the vision of a lunatic taking us far, far west, to a luminous clearing, not a human in sight, pre-Edenic, with just a hungry bear and a fleshy fish in a still clear shallow mountain lake in the foreground and the distant armature of an immense tumultuous waterfall grasping prismatic light (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15:
Albert Bierstadt, Mount Corcoran (1876-1877) (Corcoran Collection, National Gallery of Art
Frederic Edwin Church, Niagara (1857) , Corcoran Collection, National Gallery of Art

The Last Word

I pause here, no longer as a guide but as testigo, bearing witness as a gerund, as Corcoran did when he was assembling his private collection as a contemplative explorer of American cultural histories. Corcoran in Washington, D.C. dwelt not so far, far away from Mount Alto where once, not so long ago, an adolescent dreamed of a national imagination through the lens of a mere shard of mica pivoting as a prism in his fingertips. Jefferson then, it is rumored, impatiently hit the ground to see the high noon sun multiplied in the immensity of dusty red clay particles reflecting heavenly light.