One Look at Charlottesville Is Worth 3,000 Bicentennial Projects: ARCHITECTURE VIEW

Huxtable, Ada Louise

New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 2, 1975; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 127

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

One Look at Charlottesville Is Worth 3,000 Bicentennial Projects

Ready or not, here comes the Bicentennial. The celebration has been in the works for nine years, from the establishment of the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in 1966 to the setting up of its Congressionally-sponsored replacement, the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration in January of last year. Bicentennial organizations exist in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam and American Samoa. More than 1,900 Bicentennial Communities have been accredited by the Bicentennial Administration. And there are now nearly 3,000 Bicentennial projects on the way, some of which are eligible for matching grants from the Federal government.

All this activity is supported by 10 regional offices and a headquarters staff in Washington and $20-million in operating funds and matching grants. There is a national administrator, John W. Warner, whose Bicentennial peregrinations have taken him from Hawaii, Paris and London to Bismarck, N.D., where he finds enthusiasm running higher than in the effete East, or what is called the cradle of the American Revolution. (North Dakota ranks third of the 50 states in the number of its Bicentennial projects; the current count is 400.)

If anyone wants to know what actually is cooking, the place to find out is the latest, inch-and-a-half thick Official Master Register of Bicentennial Activities, published periodically by the ARBA (as it inevitably had to be known). The roughly 3,000 projects are listed alphabetically from Agriculture, Archeology, Architecture and Athletics to Sculpture, Theater, Transportation and Travel. The 96 officially recognized projects (as of the September, 1974, listing) range from the Adams National Historic Site Improvement, the American Bicentennial Fleet and the American Farm Traveling Exhibition of California to the Tournament of Roses parade, Trees from the Nation's History, the Washington Crossing the Delaware program, World Food Conference, World Theater Festival, a London exhibition on 2,000 years of American Indian art, and the 25th National Square Dance Convention.

That's pluralism, and there's nothing wrong with that. But bread and circuses would come to mind, in these parlous times—no disrespect meant to the Bicentennial—if so much of this did not threaten to be achingly dull. The efforts are obviously going to range from admirable to atrocious, from worthwhile to pedestrian, to downright peculiar. But it is a far cry from the plane on which it all started off and stumbled along, more or less, for those first nine years. The Bicentennial was going to be an occasion to remake America. Instead of a World's Fair-type celebration, the opportunity was going to be used to upgrade the environment, to renew American cities, improve transportation, build new parks, eliminate ghettos, provide amenities, right wrongs and uplift the quality of American life.

There were ambitious proposals. One of the country's best architectural firms, Mitchell-Giurgola, invested substantial study in a Bicentennial project to redevelop blighted areas of Philadelphia. Another respected firm, Davis, Brody, devised a system of Bicentennial parks that would have served as settings for special events and left recreation and open space in a permanent network of state parks. This actually reached the point of an official Washington announcement. More than one imaginative proposal was made for such things as the improvement of the Eastern transportation corridor, in the form of a moving, continuous exhibition that would take place on trains and in stations, with an upgrading of mass transit facilities to remain after 1976.

It all foundered, primarily on money, and on the complexities of administering a difficult social vision. It is doubtful if it could even have been done with money, since American revolutionary know-how seems to be reaching paralysis for 1976. And it all boiled down, eventually, to exhibitions and events, a much more comfortable and traditional way to celebrate history. It is easier to record the dream than to make it happen.

Some of the best of these exhibitions are opening now, with surprisingly little fanfare. There was a quietly excellent, evocative show as early as last year at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, called "In the Hearts and Minds of the People." It sensitively portrayed, through paintings, objects and settings, the transformations of the spirit that led to the Revolution. This will be replaced on April 19 (anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord) by a second show, part of a planned trilogy; the new one is entitled "The Die is Now Cast: The Road to American Independence" (through Nov. 16, 1975).

The first official International Bicentennial exhibition has just been launched in Paris: "The World of Franklin and Jefferson" by Charles and Ray Eames. (Mrs. Eames's velvet knee breeches at the opening got more American newspaper linage than the show.) "New York in the New Republic" is the theme of a detailed and charming Bicentennial show now installed at the New York Historical Society, directed by Mary Black (through Dec., 1976).

Most of these shows are striking for their preoccupation with the image and quality and appearance of the early Republic as well as with its historic events. The emphasis is on what the world of Franklin and Jefferson was really like, or what the founding fathers wanted it to be. Ideals and architecture have never been so closely allied. Out of political accounts and the unification of a nation comes the picture of that nation in terms of the physical setting that had so much to do with its spirit and its style.

"The people of the republic," according to Mary Black at the Historical Society, "looked on themselves as a neo-classical society at the height of its influence and power." The United States was visualized as a political and architectural Athens. A classical capital was planned in Washington. Every settlement of the new republic soon had its small Greek temple on a hill or riverbank. To George Washington, this was the "new empire of the West." To Thomas Jefferson, its buildings and its aspirations were inseparable; both were to be cast in the image of Greece and Rome. It was democratic élitism, or élite democracy, whichever way you wish to put it; esthetic and environmental pluralism was yet to be discovered. Roadville, real estate speculation and fast food outlets were all far in the future. That world was to flower fully for the Bicentennial.

What was the original ideal really like? It is worth looking back to see. We went to Charlottesville, Va., to find it—in the buildings designed by the man who was both statesman and architect, whose personal (non-plural, non-populist) will and taste was the single most determining factor in the formulation of the shape and style of the emerging nation. Without denigrating those 3,000 Bicentennial projects, we cannot think of any kind of celebration or commemoration to equal a trip to the source. Next week, the real world of Jefferson.

Correction: In an article on Feb. 2 ("Why Did We Lose Grand Central as a Landmark?"), a speculatively built office tower that remained empty when completed was referred to as One New York Plaza. It should have been Two New York Plaza.