ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Thomas Jefferson's Grand Paradox

The University of Virginia, built from 1817 to 1827, is probably the single most beautiful and effective architectural group of its kind in the country, or in the history of American building. And since it is a work so distinctly from the heart and mind of Thomas Jefferson, the great statesman and humanist whose art and politics shared a common philosophy and culture, it would be hard to pick a better way to observe the Bicentennial than to experience his "academical village" at first hand. It is doubtful if any of the approximately 3,000 Bicentennial exhibitions and events gathering steam in their penultimate year of preparation can compete with a trip to the source to touch base with the beginnings of the new nation.

Not that they aren't aware of the Bicentennial at the university. There is a restoration project under way for the rotunda, the focal structure of the Jefferson-designed complex, that is expected to be completed for 1976. I paid an advance visit on a day in late winter, in soft rain. For February, the temperature was mild, and the even light and gray sky set off the Jeffersonian formula of red brick and white colonnades with a singular clarity and serenity. The wet weather enhanced the color of clay-red earth; the green of the grass was pre-spring muted.

As it was conceived and still stands, the heart of the University of Virginia consists of two rows of continuous, connected pavilions and colonnades facing each other on the east and west sides of an approximately 750-foot-wide lawn. Called the east and west lawns, these rows are backed by a second, arcaded row of dormitories known as the east and west ranges. There are gardens between the rows, enclosed with serpentine brick walls. At the center of the main axis of the group, at the north end, is the rotunda. The complex is set on a ridge, so that the modern university recedes below it.

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The Grand Paradox of Thomas Jefferson

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The three-sided rectangle was meant to be open ended, for a spectacular view of the valley and mountains beyond. With a sublime stroke of insensitivity, the vista was closed with new construction in the 1890's by McKim, Mead and White. Thus do architects treat each other's aims and achievements.

If the vista were open now, however, the view would be of motels, shopping centers, gas stations and the random signs that are the totems of the 20th century environment. To get to the world of Jefferson one must go through the world of Venturi—a traumatic, time-tube trip from the pop landscape of the 20th-century to the neo-classical architectural elegance of the early 19th century. Motels to Monticello, it might be called, or, subtitled, how the rolling hills and rocky ridges of the beautiful Piedmont, sweeping to the Blue Ridge Mountains and the rim of the sky, became the world of the schlockbuilt fast buck.

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The campus is literally centuries away. The classical pavilions, of which there are five on each side, are joined by the colonnaded student dormitories between. They were used originally for instruction and the professors' residences. Although the effect is unified, each one is different, as is frequently pointed out, because Jefferson wanted the various classical orders illustrated to serve also as teaching models. They range from the Doric of the Diocletian Baths and the Ionic of the Theater of Marcellus to the three orders as found in Palladio.

The colonnades between pavilions gradually grow longer from one end to the other, a fact that is noted less frequently. The one exception to the Roman or Palladian orders is a maverick pavilion with a recessed arch that seems to derive from the latest thing in France at that date—the work of Claude Nicholas Ledoux—a not surprising architectural adventure for Jefferson the Francophile. This use of the new French style was as avant-garde as some of the other sources were doctrinaire.

But there is nothing doctrinaire about this architecture as a whole, and that is the reason for its beauty and importance. Although it gives the appearance of uniformity in the classical totality of its composition and details, it is still rich in calculated variety. There is something in man that loves order and unity; they are virtues that induce serenity. But the unity of this complex is never static, because of the differences in its never-identical parts and the subtle device of the changing measure. The architecture is a kind of paradox: at once didactic and free, monumental and humanistic, aristocratic and pragmatic, romantic and rational, formal and hospitable. It combines an intimate human scale with controlled, universal vistas. The result is consummately lovely, with a quality of grace lost to our age. These are lessons that have escaped the modern monumentalists.

But it was far from perfect. Roofs leaked, chimneys smoked, the orientation that produced such handsome effect also exposed the rows to burning western sun in summer and driving east winds and rains in winter, and cut off southern breezes in the heat. The pavilion lecture rooms were inadequate and the professors' quarters didn't work for family life. The proximity of the students to faculty was a cause for complaint. But whatever is, or was, wrong seems to be forgiven today for the impact and pleasure of the whole. Students compete avidly for the cell-like rooms with their (unchanged) outdoor facilities. Firewood stands neatly stacked outside the doors.

It may be somewhat ungrateful to examine the role of Jefferson more closely in this design. The concept was clearly his; it had surfaced shortly after 1800 in earlier proposals. And his adjustment of the plan and relationships of the parts are sensitive responses to site, function and form. But there is a tendency to magnify the considerable talent of a man who was essentially a gifted amateur.

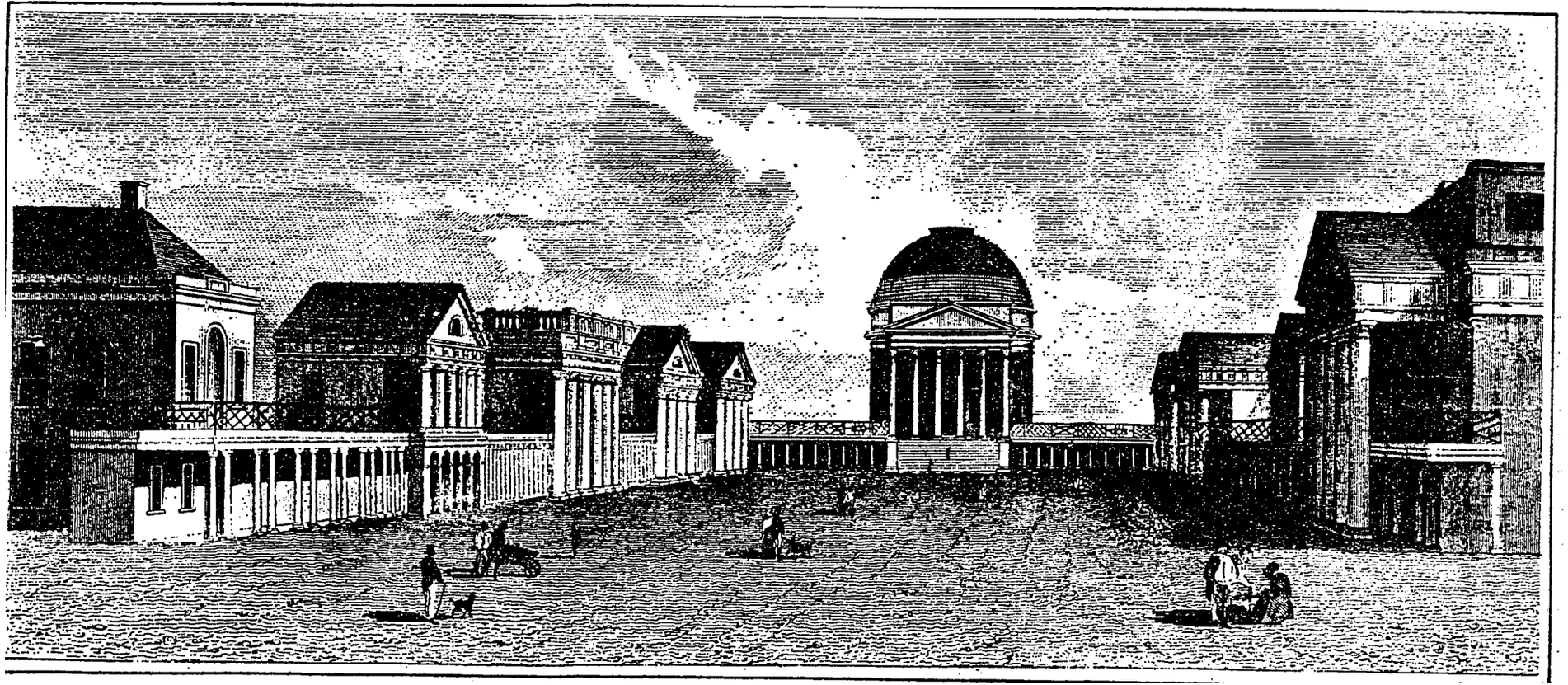
Jefferson was "fixated" on books and on "fishing" his designs out of them, according to Benjamin Latrobe, his friend and America's outstanding architect at that time. Latrobe was a man of sophisticated professional training and taste. Jefferson turned to Latrobe for advice on the Virginia scheme, and the suggestions he got from both Latrobe and from William Thornton, the first architect of the Capitol, are exactly what turned the design from a skilled amateur concept into a professional masterwork.

He must have been a bit of a nuisance, as so many well-intentioned amateurs are. To both Thornton and Latrobe he wrote for "a few sketches, such as may not take you a minute..."—a request that always makes the pros groan. But Thornton suggested columns instead of piers for the arcade, which adds much to the power of the scheme. And Latrobe crystallized that power with the proposal for "something grand" at the north end, in the form of a great dominating building, where Jefferson had just intended to continue the rows. This gives the composition its full force and definition. And Latrobe anchored the plan with the pavilions at the corners. These changes were catalytic improvements. Jefferson chose the Pantheon as the model for the rotunda, and made able adjustments in scale.

When Jefferson worked alone, as at Monticello, he produced an extraordinary, eccentric, half-failed building. It is not a really beautiful house, inside or out. There are splendid starts and inept stops and passages that mismatch intention and result, demonstrating at every unresolved turn how his spatial and structural knowledge failed to keep up with his ideas. Architecturally, that house is in trouble everywhere, but the vision that comes through was exceptional. More than a cultivated classicist, more than an expert Palladian, Jefferson had already embraced the bold "new" expressionistic neo-classicism of Soane in England and Ledoux in France. The two-story high rooms, the strange second floor disguised as part of a single story, all grope passionately for the new spatial expression.

Jefferson experimented and overreached magnificently—another characteristic lost to our cautious, computerized time. He never played safe and he avoided, in the words of the historian William Pierson, "the sterility of the absolute." His architecture reveals him as a "humanist and poet concerned with the goodness of life."

The Jefferson design for the University of Virginia suggests the whole range of values to which American democracy aspired: unity in variety, the subordination of the parts to the whole, a humanistic order and the dignity of the individual. Delight was also there. Where has delight gone in 150 years? Perhaps we should go back to basics for the Bicentennial.



An 1831 engraving of the University of Virginia