Michael W. Fazio and Patrick A. Snadon
The Domestic Architecture of Benjamin Henry Latrobe

One does not know quite what to expect when traveling carefully down the rutted driveway that runs towards Hammerwood in East Sussex. After a while, the trees part to reveal a muddle of a sandstone building with dominant late nineteenth-century fenestration and outbuildings in various states of repair. The owner’s tour of the house is low key but passionate. After years of neglect, including a period of ownership in the 1970s by the pop group Led Zeppelin, the house has been rescued from dereliction and is still being restored. Only after walking around to the garden front does one see the splendid formal composition of the main house flanked by two pavilions: one of the boldest and most progressive Greek Revival structures of its date in Britain. Constructed in the early 1790s, this is the first built masterpiece of Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1820), the celebrated neoclassicist architect of the United States Capitol and Baltimore Cathedral, arguably the two finest buildings of their time in North America.

In England, Hammerwood and its sister house by Latrobe, three miles away at Ashdown, are relatively little known. Ashdown House, also of the early 1790s, is now a preparatory school, with all the institutional character and scruffy ad hoc additions that this usage brings, but it is no less remarkable in its setting and certainly no less unexpected than Hammerwood. A crisp sandstone villa perched on high ground, it has a central, south-facing entry portico that takes the form of an embedded circular Greek temple. Inside, the portico contains a ring of elegant Ionic columns and a coffered ceiling and leads into a handsome staircase hall with chaste Greek plasterwork detailing. Looking at the old Tudor stone house demoted by Latrobe into a service wing, it is not hard to imagine what a revelation the construction of this addition must have been. Yet until now, both of these houses have been little published or discussed. Latrobe left England for America in 1795, where his later and more imposing public works justifiably are much better known.

A substantial new book by Michael Fazio and Patrick Snadon intends to set the record straight by examining all the known domestic works of Latrobe, starting with the handful of early houses erected in England and followed by those constructed across America. Plans and photographs are generously included, many in color. Where buildings have been lost—alas, often the case in America—carefully researched archival photographs and computer reconstructions are used. One author, Fazio, is an architect, and the other, Snadon, is an interior designer; both have been trained as architectural historians and have been deeply involved in the repair and restoration of Latrobe buildings. Consequently, throughout this book there is a sense that they have grasped their subject and understood not just the outside architectural historical influences affecting Latrobe but also his architectural design processes. Proof of this design understanding appears in the spread across pages 536–37 that shows at a glance the diagrammatic plans of all of the houses categorized into four main design groupings.

The book starts with an exploration of Latrobe’s origins before moving into case studies of the various key houses of his career. A complete catalog of the domestic works comes at the end. Benjamin Latrobe was born in England and had a somewhat varied upbringing, ultimately resisting his father’s urges to study at a Moravian seminary. He embarked on a successful grand tour of Europe and, like so many of his contemporaries, saw first hand the ancient temples of Paestum and Rome that would have a profound influence on his later work, as would Parisian hôtels. Latrobe apparently translated books on Frederick the Great and on the Danish Revolution, and he wrote a volume on the African explorer James Bruce before settling down in London to work for the great engineer James Smewton. Latrobe always saw himself as an engineer as well as an architect, a point he would later stress in the United States, where he felt his professional stature was not recognized: “I believe I am the first who, in our country, has endeavoured to place the profession of Architect and Civil Engineer on that footing of respectability which it occupies in Europe. But I have not so far succeeded as to make it an eligible profession for one who has the education and feelings of a gentleman” (4). By and large,
the thread of this struggle can be seen to run throughout the American domestic work.

After his time with Smeaton, Latrobe then went to work for three years in the architectural office of Samuel Pepys Cockerell following the death of Cockerell’s mentor Sir Robert Taylor. The influence of Taylor’s crisp Palladian houses and of Cockerell’s more idiosyncratic designs runs through all of Latrobe’s later works. Latrobe’s departure to America was likely caused by mounting debts and the premature death of his wife. Early efforts to establish a reputation with published works in Virginia were followed by attempts to develop family connections in Philadelphia. Latrobe stowed to “define architectural practice in America for an unenlightened, sceptical populace” (192), a struggle reflected in the reduced quality of his commissions and his consequently straightforward designs. Simple neo-Palladian houses with thin construction and slightly attenuated proportions (to provide the height of rooms required to manage a hot climate) are a clear step down from the sophisticated stone enterprises at Hammerwood and Ashdown; as the authors write, “an architect can become successful only if clients provide commissions” (514). However, the succession of houses do illustrate how Latrobe reinterpreted recurring design themes of his English work in an American context. Indeed, the process of watching Latrobe’s American work evolve through the pages of this book is one of its great pleasures and allows the reader to distill visually the defining features of what the authors assert is “the first consciously American domestic architecture” (588).

The “big break” must have been Latrobe’s meeting with the future president Thomas Jefferson as early as 1798, “through their mutual activities in the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia” (359). By 1802, President Jefferson had called Latrobe to begin work on the dry docks in the new federal capital, then under construction. Alterations followed on the president’s house—originally designed by James Hoban in 1792—which Latrobe described as “a great sow” (371). Although internal changes were not executed, those celebrated White House porticos that appear so prominently and regularly on CNN are the result of Latrobe.

Perhaps the most memorable and for the authors one of the “most creative and rational” of the American houses is the Pope Villa (circa 1810–13) at Lexington, Kentucky, where the “unorthodox front façade, with its ‘upside-down’ arrangement of huge, triple windows in the second story and small, single windows in the first story, reflected Latrobe’s distinctive distribution of public and service services” (586). A delightful circular central space inspired loosely by Palladio’s Villa Rotunda and Lord Burlington’s Chiswick House links the lower service and upper public stories of the Pope Villa. Latrobe’s building demonstrates how good proportion and planning could create architectural delight even with flimsy stud wall construction and local red brick. That Pope Villa survived is miraculous given an astonishing “gingerbread” reclad in the 1840s through 1860s, subdivision into ten flats during the 1950s, and a devastating fire of 1987. The remaking of its key interior spaces has not yet been carried out but it should, as this building is of international significance.

By the time of the Pope Villa, Latrobe was heavily engaged in his public works on Capitol Hill and at Baltimore Cathedral. Although it is noted that the “scenic route” through the Pope Villa is a reinterpretation of the planning in Latrobe’s southwest wing of the Capitol, the inevitable influence that these large concurrent works must have had on his domestic practice is barely discussed. Baltimore Cathedral is mentioned only twice in this lengthy tome, and one is left to wonder how Latrobe’s work on this building influenced his later houses, or indeed whether the experimental early houses such as Ashdown informed aspects of the cathedral. This feeling of omission makes wider comparison to other architects difficult to develop. The obvious closest parallel, Sir John Soane, evidently had much better luck with his later house designs. Wealthier clients and established patrons enabled him to develop highly detailed and sophisticated houses well into his career; for instance, the reworkings of Moggerhanger (1812) and Marden Hill (1818) and the rebuildings of Wotton (1820) all enabled him to experiment with wider themes and concerns that developed into and from his public works. Whether Latrobe’s domestic and public work cross-fertilized each other is not clear, although his final project, the State Bank of Louisiana (1819–20) in New Orleans, suggests that this may well have been so. A wonderful section of domes and apses reveals him to be an innovator to the very end.

One completes this book wondering what would have happened if Latrobe had stayed in England—more elaborate country houses in and around East Sussex maybe, but certainly this was a case of England’s loss being America’s gain.

Peter Pennoyer and Anne Walker
The Architecture of Warren & Wetmore

Mark Alan Hewitt, Kate Lemos, William Morrison, and Charles D. Warren
Carrère & Hastings Architects

Jeffrey T. Tilman
Arthur Brown Jr: Progressive Classicist

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