Exhibitions

From the Grounds Up: Thomas Jefferson’s Architecture and Design
Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia, Charlottesville
26 January–29 April 2018

Recalling the many accomplishments of his long public life, the polymath Thomas Jefferson instructed that his gravestone be inscribed with what he considered the three most important: “Author of the Declaration of American Independence of the Statute of Virginia Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia.” To mark the bicentennial of the last of those achievements—the founding of the university on the edge of the courthouse town that stood in the shadow of Monticello—Jefferson scholar Richard Guy Wilson organized From the Grounds Up, an exhibition of drawings, books, letters, paintings, prints, models, tools, and architectural fragments that exemplified Jefferson’s passion for architectural design and building. Just how absorbing those passions could be was revealed to a visitor to Monticello who stumbled around scaffolding in unplastered rooms. Rather than apologizing for the unfinished appearance of the house so many years after it was built, Jefferson stated that he fervently hoped that it would “remain so during my life, as architecture is my delight, and putting up, and pulling down, one of my favorite amusements.”

Although staged to commemorate the laying of the foundations for the first pavilion on the grounds of Jefferson’s “academical village,” the exhibition did not focus solely on the design and construction of the university; rather, it served as an informed introduction to those sources that inspired his abiding interest in architecture (Figure 1). Jefferson was just as fascinated with the practical aspects of building as he was with the theoretical nature of design. Wilson emphasized this point by displaying utilitarian objects such as nails made by slaves in the nailery on Monticello’s Mulberry Row, period tools, a brick fragment from Poplar Forest, and a door from the same place fabricated by the enslaved carpenter John Hemings. Like many of his contemporaries in the late colonial and early republican eras, Jefferson was very much his own contractor, concerned with the quality of materials, the skill of his craftsmen, and the elaborate choreography of men and materials required to keep a project on schedule. Jefferson’s interests ranged from the design of the smallest molding details to comprehensive designs for public buildings and entire cities. Alongside the tools of the trade in the exhibition were display cases holding copies of many architectural treatises that Jefferson accumulated for his library at Monticello, including Andrea Palladio’s Four Books of Architecture, which Jefferson considered his bible of design principles. These works emphasized symmetry, proportion, and the proper use of the five orders of ancient Roman architecture, precepts that shaped and defined Jefferson’s personal and public vision of the architecture of the new nation.

Occupying a large room as well as a smaller, elongated octagonal room off to one side in the Fralin Museum of Art, the exhibition provided no clear signposts to advise visitors on how to move through these spaces. Unfortunately, no catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition. Visitors were provided with an illustrated pamphlet containing a short essay by Wilson that described the importance of Jefferson in the history of early American architecture, but the essay was not tied directly to the objects on display in the galleries. A tall, freestanding panel in the center of the large room offered a useful introduction to the exhibition’s central theme: Jefferson’s engagement with architectural design as private citizen and as a man at the forefront of public affairs in Virginia and the new nation, a man eager to encourage the promotion of a “chaste & good style of building” through models designed by him and a small coterie of knowledgeable colleagues. Beyond that, there was little to direct visitors around the larger room or to explain the clustering of objects. Most of the labels that identified the objects provided little narrative context. Those for the books and other items contained in flat cases were inconveniently attached to the cases’ low skirting boards.

In addition to the pamphlet containing Wilson’s essay, visitors could borrow a returnable gallery guide, which introduced the principal themes of the exhibition and described some of the objects related to those themes. Those who did not avail themselves of the guide tended to flit around the room, attracted by whatever caught their eye. What they may have overlooked were eight quotations from Jefferson and some of his contemporaries stenciled on the perimeter walls, which announced the topics of individual areas. For those acquainted with Jefferson, the quotes were familiar beacons, but most of the labels that identified the objects provided little narrative context. Those for the books and other items contained in flat cases were inconveniently attached to the cases’ low skirting boards.

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The exhibition was structured for a clockwise route around the main room and side gallery. The first section, “Design,” dealt with what Jefferson regarded as the sorry state of building in his native Virginia, where “the genius of architecture seems to have shed its malédiction over this land.” Wilson illustrated this introductory section with the Bodleian Plate, a copperplate engraving of the public buildings of Williamsburg made in the late 1730s for an unrealized book by William Byrd II on the natural history of the colony. In his Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson disparaged the architectural quality of these structures, going so far as to call the Public Hospital and his alma mater, the College of William and Mary, “rude mis-shapen piles.” He did acknowledge that the second Capitol (which postdates the engraving) was “tolerably just in its proportions and ornaments” and the “most pleasing piece of architecture we have”; yet, parading his pedantry for a European audience, he declared the intercolumniation of the double-tiered portico “too large” and the pediment “too high for its span.” Jefferson never traveled south of Virginia, but he was familiar with the buildings of Newport, New York, and Philadelphia, and he admired some of them for their proper application of the classical orders. Sometimes he sketched buildings that took his fancy, such as the Hammond-Harwood House in Annapolis, William Buckland’s late polygonal-winged masterpiece.

In the section titled “Architecture,” the exhibition associated the beginnings of Jefferson’s architectural education with his acquisition of books on architecture and the arts. It described as a watershed his five years in Paris in the late 1780s, which enabled him to study the neoclassical designs of Jacques-Germain Soufflot, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, and other French architects. Jefferson traveled in England, the Low Countries, and the south of France, where he encountered surviving classical buildings. The section titled “Nature” included contemporary prints depicting English gardens that Jefferson visited with John Adams in 1786, as well as prints of American scenic wonders such as Virginia’s Natural Bridge, which Jefferson once owned; this last was represented by a painting by Frederic Church.

Jefferson’s disdain for the buildings and craftsmanship found in his native state, his voracious appetite for European architectural treatises providing rules for the classical orders, and his love of nature powerfully influenced his many building projects. These prejudices and preferences informed the exhibition’s sections on Monticello, Poplar Forest, and other buildings for which Jefferson supplied designs or offered advice (such as James Madison’s house, Montpelier). These sections were illustrated with scores of drawings, most by Jefferson but some by John Neilson and James Dinsmore, skilled Irish craftsmen who worked for Jefferson on a variety of projects.

The last three sections described the public buildings where Jefferson’s influence was the greatest and perhaps the most lasting. Jefferson devised models that were intended to inform and educate a new nation about the values contained within the forms of classical architecture. He worked for many years developing the curriculum, selecting the books, and choosing the professors for the university he founded, acting on his belief that education was paramount to an informed democratic citizenry. That university’s architecture was an exercise in pedagogy, providing students and visitors with models exemplifying the precepts of classical design. The exhibition’s most detailed section was the one devoted to the design of the university’s ten pavilions and Rotunda; the labels provided in this section described contemporary and ancient precedents for the university’s buildings as well as the contributions made by William Thornton, Benjamin H. Latrobe, and others.

The university’s architectural pedagogy had its origins some thirty years earlier in Jefferson’s design for his state’s most important building—the new Capitol in Richmond. He based the building’s form.
The Chicago Architecture Biennial

What Is the Payback?

New architecture and design biennials are proliferating at a rapid pace throughout the world. They seem to be fulfilling needs that are driven by the role of global tourism in urban economies and by a desire among educators, professionals, and general audiences for more inclusive and public discussions about the built environment. The most successful biennials are the ones that connect people who have innovative ideas with those who have the resources to implement them.

I write as an architectural educator and historian (and occasional critic) who trained in Venice (where the world’s first architectural biennial was officially launched in 1980 under the directorship of Italian architect and historian Paolo Portoghesi) and moved to Chicago shortly before the city launched itself into the biennial circuit with its inaugural edition in 2015–16. Thus, I am no stranger to the power of biennials to stimulate, exhaust, and occasionally frustrate body and mind with installations and catalogues that promise diligent visitors illumination concerning the complexities of contemporary architecture and urban culture.

In recent years biennials have done what a handful of architecture centers in North America (Canadian Centre for Architecture) and Europe (Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Netherlands Architecture Institute) started decades earlier by catering to ordinary citizens in addition to educators, professionals, and students. Like diviners who find water where none appears on the surface, the best curators identify and train our focus on important issues that we have been too distracted to notice or have lacked the knowledge and critical distance to understand without guidance.

In Chicago, with its remarkable history of groundbreaking architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning, civic and cultural leaders made the wise and strategic decision to embark on an initiative aimed at highlighting the role that design might play in solving great challenges of equity and environmental sustainability in the twenty-first century. The inaugural Chicago Architecture Biennial, titled The State of the Art of Architecture, was curated by Sarah Herda (director of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, headquartered in Chicago) and Joseph Grima (currently the creative director of Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands). The second biennial, held in 2017–18 and titled Make New History, was codirected by a duo of practicing architects and educators, Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee of the Los Angeles–based firm Johnston Marklee. A few days after the closing of the second biennial, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel’s press office proudly announced that “more than 50,000 residents and visitors from the U.S. and around the world took part.” The press release went on to report that “the Biennial’s core sites—the Chicago Cultural Center and the City Gallery in the Historic Water Tower—received 290,834 visitors throughout the exhibition, an 8% increase over 2015.” In contrast to the Venice Biennale’s hefty ticket prices, admission to the Chicago Biennial is free, and the high attendance numbers—which include both local and international guests—might be understood in part as a result of this civic largesse.

As the appetite for attendance grows, how might we determine whether the Chicago Biennial is establishing a reputation in addition to attracting high numbers of visitors? Is it too early to tell? We might ask if the iterations of the biennial presented thus far have singly or cumulatively had any tangible impact on the city and the people who make decisions about the quality of the built environment. In other words, have the biennial’s artistic directors (this title speaks volumes about the ambitions of the curators in shaping content and aesthetics) helped to educate future clients so that they might invest more heavily in the quality of the built environment rather than surrender to developer-driven profit-seeking at every turn? Can the biennial provide continuing education credits by encouraging architectural firms of every size in Chicago to raise the bar of their output? Or has the existence of yet another biennial contributed to curator inflation, in which members of the architectural academy leverage the professional curatorial circuit to establish creative practices that avoid the challenges (and real-life compromises) associated with real projects and clients? In a form of postoccupancy review of the two previous biennials, one might ask: How did ideas that circulated and were