

"Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia: Restoration
of the Academical Village"

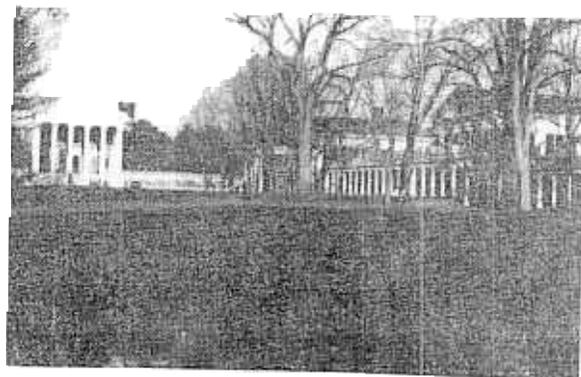
by James Murray Howard, PhD, AIA
Architect for the Historic Buildings

Between 1817 and 1826 the central precinct of the University of Virginia was built in the rolling hills just east of the Shenandoah Valley. The individual primarily responsible for obtaining the site, designing the buildings, raising construction funds and managing the building process was Thomas Jefferson, a remarkable "gentleman architect" who had already served his country as author of the Declaration of Independence, ambassador to France and President.

Jefferson called his creation the Academical Village, thereby emphasizing in its design concept that all activities of daily life and the academic community should be served by a closely knit arrangement of man-made structures that would be thoroughly integrated with the landscape. Furthermore the buildings themselves were inseparable from the educative process, serving as three-dimensional textbooks of classically inspired architectural detailing and as embodiments of the nobility and cultural advancements that neoclassicists so admired in their dreams of Roman antiquity, albeit dreams filtered through Italian and French minds of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Names such as Palladio and Ledoux are frequently cited as sources. Amidst these new representatives of European sophistication in the fine arts, Jefferson established a curriculum that stressed the liberal arts. Altogether the Jeffersonian precinct was a unique cultural statement that made clear his admiration for an honorable and highly developed European heritage that could and should be the foundation for cultural developments in the New World. As a model for academic life, it remains unequaled in the Americas.



The Academical Village,
c. 1826



The Rotunda and Pavilions
II, IV & VI

At the heart of the setting was the Rotunda, a half-size derivative of the Roman Pantheon, providing library and meeting spaces. It fronted onto a long greensward that was flanked by ten tall Pavilions and fifty-four student rooms, all being connected in two long rows, one to the east side of the greensward, the other to the west. Professors lived on the top floor of each Pavilion and taught their classes on the lower floor. Behind were ten gardens inspired by English and Continental models and serving, as did the Pavilions themselves, to instruct the viewer in matters of design. Beyond the gardens were two more rows of buildings composed of six dining halls, called Hotels, and another fifty-five student rooms. Thus were all aspects of daily life and learning intimately and harmoniously blended.

Some 160 years later, this unique university setting still exists, with few physical modifications, most of them minor. In the 1980s it has become the focus of a comprehensive restoration program. In the past only the Rotunda has enjoyed similar attention, first when it burned in 1895 and later when the circa-1900 interior alterations were substantially eliminated to reestablish Jefferson's arrangement of spaces. Most of the other buildings had slowly deteriorated into a genteel state of decay. Correspondingly, the familiarity bred by daily use had rendered the buildings little different from ordinary ones in the eyes of many, making benign disregard as great a threat as physical decay itself. The assumption seems to have been that, if absolutely necessary, some governmental or private group would fund modest repair efforts. Except for the work in the 1970s on the Rotunda, the centerpiece of the composition, and major rehabilitation of the gardens just prior to that, few changes occurred throughout most of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is remarkable that such was the case, despite the studies of Jefferson and his works by scholars such as Fiske Kimball, William B. O'Neal and Frederick D. Nichols, all of whom were associated with the University. The public simply did not understand the growing urgency and would not understand until the field of preservation became a recognized, indeed a popularized, movement in the United States and until the decrepitude, especially due to leaking roofs and rotting wood, was severe. Only in the last decade has concern for the entire Academical Village been transformed into financial support. In 1979 recognition of the most egregious physical problem, roof leakage, fostered initiation of a repair effort aimed at that problem alone. We anticipate substantial completion of that program by late 1988, realizing that it will never truly be completed. It is now widely understood that care for these buildings can never be a finished task. This understanding in itself has been the first step in guarding against the same sort of gradual decline that traditionally obtained.

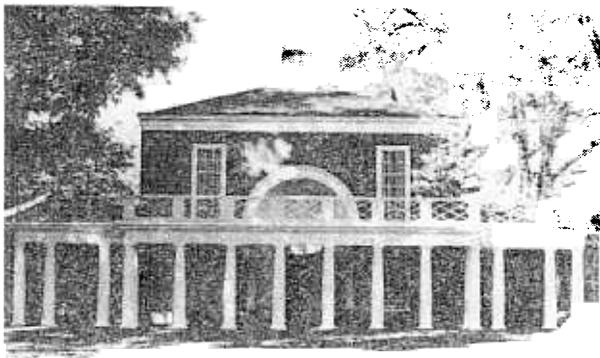
In 1983 there began a series of occupancy changes in the Pavilions that have allowed a rapid adjustment in attitudes from a posture of modest custodial care toward one of professional restoration and curatorship, particularly at Pavilions III and VIII. It is the ten Pavilions that are the focus of our present work. In concert with urgently needed construction work at the site, study is also being given to philosophical, managerial and technical issues, which will be examined in the remainder of this essay.

Initiation of a prolonged program of roof repairs and a modest renovation of Pavilion IX, carried out amidst local television and press coverage, were the first recent actions that gained a wide audience. Simultaneously a number of individuals began to vigorously campaign for recognition by the University and the State of Virginia of their responsibilities as property owners, indeed heirs of Jefferson's cultural legacy. The result of all these efforts was financial support from both the University and the State, in amounts never before allocated to the basic tasks of routine maintenance and repair. In 1984 the University's Board of Visitors, its governing board, created the Jeffersonian Restoration Advisory Board, some twenty professionals and philanthropists charged with establishing a permanent endowment, to sustain study and work on the buildings, and with advising the Board of Visitors on matters pertaining to those pursuits. In the same year an architect was appointed to serve full-time as guardian and advocate of the Academical Village.

Since 1984 the workings of the Jeffersonian Restoration Advisory Board and continuation of work on the Pavilions have generated discussions about restoration philosophy. There is agreement that ideas codified in the Venice Charter constitute the fundamental reference for action. It is also agreed that the site must remain vital and fully used, rather than becoming a museum, isolated from change and current life; that greater emphasis must be placed on documentary and site research; and that the site is something other than mere real estate. On other issues, opinions are frequently divided. Recognizing the many changes in restoration philosophy in this country since the pioneering work at Williamsburg, it is not surprising that we encounter varied opinions when discussing such questions as whether or not to rebuild architectural features that have vanished. Likewise, views on interpretation with regard to furnishings are diverse. But it is surprising that the relative importance of demonstrable archaeological evidence as a basis for decision making is sometimes questioned, as may be the case when scientific analysis yields evidence contrary to conventional wisdom or current taste, which often rely on relatively

recent popular images of what historic buildings ought to look like. Traditions alone, especially when changes have become parts of the traditional image, are among the strongest barriers against acceptance of contradictory scientific data. Such matters are even more problematic while the contemporary American architectural climate is suffused with experimental reuse of historical details. Although it is a relief to hear professionals admit that there might be such a thing as taste, it is not reassuring to hear it said that if the taste exhibited by the historical evidence is found aesthetically bothersome, it may be ignored in favor of treatments that are more satisfying to present-day sensibilities. One suspects that no single response to research findings holds the entire answer, while firmly believing that incontrovertible physical evidence can scarcely be dismissed lightly. At the University of Virginia, reliance on physical evidence is becoming the generally accepted practice. Thus, for example, we now have two Pavilions displaying the colors used in the 1820s. And doors on those buildings have been grained in the same patterns and tones first used to replicate mahogany.

Also related to the matter of evidence is the problem of rebuilding features that have been altered or eliminated. Such questions are simplified when substantial documentary evidence exists or when the building fabric still holds enough clues to allow reasonable assumptions about early conditions. For several years we have sought sufficient evidence to decide whether or not to rebuild balustrades and parapets, in one case an entire attic zone, atop several of the Pavilions. Early engravings and Jefferson's rudimentary sketches give conflicting evidence about what might have been built originally; written descriptions, even less. Photographs show partial glimpses of two such conditions, at Pavilions III and X, but still oblige one to make considerable "leaps of faith" in reconstructing the unseen portions. We have been encouraged by recent findings at Pavilion X, showing more clearly how its wooden parapet-like attic zone may have been mounted. It is also fortunate that some of the earliest roofing materials appear to have been encapsulated for over 160 years beneath subsequent coverings on that same building. We hope that further examination of physical fabric and documents may allow us to rebuild both attic zone and roof essentially as they were in the 1820s. Such an action does, however, beg the question of whether or not to rebuild similar features atop several other Pavilions, since evidence for their detailing is at present very fragmentary.



Pavilion IX, the facade of which was inspired by the works of Ledoux



Pavilion VIII, principal public space on first floor immediately following restoration, c. 1985

The foregoing discussion of issues related to restoration philosophy perhaps implies that our decision-making process yields opinions that can immediately be implemented. It will come as no surprise that this recently formalized restoration program is not alone in trying to influence the site. As previously stated, the Jeffersonian precinct is part of a state university and a state government. Consequently there are numerous committees and bureaucratic interests with their own agendas. As a check on ill-advised haste, such circumstances can be beneficial; as impediments to rational and expeditious behavior, they can be counterproductive. Though it is reasonable to assume that power will accrue to the benefit of the restoration program as the years pass, it is not altogether clear which voices will be strongest, especially since not all questions are curatorial ones alone. It is encouraging that, in the 1980s, all parties have realized that the impact of their decisions will be more thoroughly scrutinized by a broader public than ever before. Likewise there is full accord on the desire to have the site become a focus of widespread curatorial study, serving as a laboratory for research and technical development in the fields of preservation and restoration, thus continuing Jefferson's desire that the physical setting play a pedagogical role.

In the realm of pedagogy there have been a number of recent developments that support such a role within the Academical Village. Since 1984 there have been several efforts to teach craft techniques to the state construction workers who do most of the work on the Jeffersonian buildings. The requirement to use state workers is helpful because it requires the establishment of a cadre of craftsmen trained in techniques that may be hard to obtain on the open market. Retraining for each job is therefore reduced, if not eliminated. To date, the acquisition of graining skills by our painters has been remarkably good. Soon we hope to train our roofers to install

metal roofing in the manner recently uncovered at Pavilion X, where early tinplate is still intact beneath newer coverings. We also plan to introduce training in the stabilization of deteriorated wood so that we can properly repair deteriorated wood windows and trim. In themselves, none of these actions is extraordinary. For a major property where such skills have heretofore been unknown, the rapid acquisition of proper craft techniques is significant.

In summary we would comment that the 1980s are witnessing at the University of Virginia the establishment of what promises to be a lasting curatorial program for an historic property of international cultural value. As such it represents the only effort of its kind at any American university. As the ongoing preparation of a comprehensive Historic Structures Report, scheduled for completion by 1990, reveals more about the buildings as they used to be, we anticipate a wider array of issues to be debated and resolved. In the interim, efforts at the site to preserve it must be extremely cautious. The task will continue to be one of allowing the buildings to instruct the investigator, who must temper the speed of progress with objective analysis of past and present attitudes about management, restoration and that most elusive but most eloquent concept -- appropriateness.

SUMMARY

"Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia: Restoration of the Academical Village"

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Between 1817 and 1826 the central precinct of the University of Virginia was built by Thomas Jefferson, a "gentleman architect" who had already served his country as ambassador to France and President. He called it the Academical Village, emphasizing that all activities of daily life and academia should be served by an arrangement of man-made structures integrated with the landscape. The buildings also served as textbooks of classical detailing and embodiments of neoclassical ideals. Here Jefferson stated his admiration for a cultivated European heritage as the foundation for cultural developments in the New World. It remains unique in the Americas.

At its heart was the Rotunda, a half-size Roman Pantheon, providing library and meeting spaces. It faced a greensward flanked by ten Pavilions and student rooms. Professors lived on the top floor of each Pavilion and taught classes below. Behind were gardens and two more rows of dining halls and student rooms. Some 160 years later, this unique setting is the

focus of a comprehensive restoration program. The public did not understand the growing urgency until preservation became a popularized movement in the United States and until the decrepitude was severe. Occupancy changes in several Pavilions have allowed rapid progress toward professional restoration and curatorship.

Initiation of a prolonged program of roof repairs and renovation of Pavilion IX were the first recent actions to gain a wide audience. In 1984 the University created the Jeffersonian Restoration Advisory Board, some twenty professionals and philanthropists charged with establishing a permanent endowment and advising on care of the Academical Village. Also an architect was appointed as full-time guardian.

Work on the Pavilions has engendered numerous philosophical discussions. There is agreement that the Venice Charter constitutes the fundamental reference; that the site must remain vital, rather than becoming a museum; that greater emphasis must be placed on research; and that the site is not mere real estate. Otherwise, opinions are frequently divided. Though rare, it is surprising that the importance of archaeological evidence is sometimes questioned, when contrary to conventional wisdom. But there is agreement that the site should become a focus of study, a laboratory for research, thus continuing Jefferson's desire that it play a pedagogical role.

The University of Virginia has established a lasting curatorial program unique among American universities. As continuing research identifies issues, work at the site must be cautious, allowing objective analysis of attitudes about management, restoration and that most elusive but most eloquent concept -- appropriateness.

L'université de Virginie de Thomas Jefferson: Restoration du "Village universitaire"

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L'enceinte principale de l'université de Virginie fut construite entre 1817 et 1826 par Thomas Jefferson, un "gentilhomme architecte" qui avait déjà servi son pays en tant qu'ambassadeur de France puis président. Il nomma cette enceinte le "Village universitaire" (Academical Village), insistant sur le fait que toute activité quotidienne ou intellectuelle prît place au sein d'un ensemble d'édifices s'intégrant parfaitement à l'environnement. L'intention de son architecture était aussi d'illustrer les détails du classicisme et de faire de son "Village" un modèle de l'idéal néoclassique, affirmant ainsi son admiration pour l'héritage culturel européen et son désir d'en faire la fondation des développements culturels du Nouveau Monde; entreprise demeurée unique en Amérique.

Au coeur de cette enceinte se tenait la Rotonde, un panthéon romain de taille moindre, pourvu d'une bibliothèque et de lieux de rencontre. Cette Rotonde donnait sur un tapis de verdure flanqué de chambres d'étudiants et de dix Pavillons. Les professeurs logeaient à l'étage supérieur de ces Pavillons et enseignaient à l'étage inférieur. Derrière ce rang d'habitations suivait une série de jardins murés et deux rangées supplémentaires d'édifices abritant salles à manger et autres chambres d'étudiants. Quelques 160 années plus tard, ce cadre exceptionnel est devenu l'objet d'un programme complet de restauration. Le public ne saisit l'importance et l'urgence de ce programme qu'après l'essor de popularité gagné ici par les mouvements de sauvegarde et de conservation des sites, et lorsque l'état des bâtiments s'avéra profondément décrépit. Et grâce aux changements d'occupation de certains Pavillons, les progrès de leur restauration et conservation purent être accélérés.

Deux mesures récentes furent les premières à gagner une large audience: la première de ces mesures concerne le programme à long terme des réparations de toitures et la deuxième, la rénovation du Pavillon IX. En 1984, l'université créa le "Conseil consultatif à la restauration Jeffersonienne." Ce Conseil est constitué d'une vingtaine de professionnels et philanthropes chargés d'établir la permanence d'un système de conseillers et de dotations en vue de préserver le "Village universitaire." L'université appointa aussi un architecte à temps complet ayant pour charge la protection du "Village."

Les travaux effectués sur les Pavillons ont engendré nombre de discussions philosophiques d'où il ressortit -- d'un commun accord -- que la Charte de Venise servirait de base référentielle et que le site en lui-même resterait habité et animé plutôt que transformé en musée. Il fut aussi convenu de ne point considérer le "Village" comme biens fonciers et d'accorder une importance particulière aux travaux de recherches sur le site. En dehors de ces accords, l'opinion diffère souvent. Bien que rare et surprenant, il arrive que l'importance de preuves archéologiques soit mise en question, lorsque contraires au sens commun. Mais en règle générale, il est convenu de faire du site un terrain d'études et de recherches, perpétuant ainsi le rôle pédagogique que Jefferson lui-même désirait attribuer au "Village."

L'université de Virginie a établi un programme permanent de rénovation; programme unique parmi les universités américaines. Et, pendant que le travail de recherche s'occupe à identifier les problèmes issus du projet, le travail accompli sur le terrain doit être mené avec prudence, afin de permettre l'analyse objective des points de vue que soulèvent les questions d'administration, de restauration et -- concept évasif quoique parlant -- de convenance.