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Jefferson and Palladio: Constructing a New World



Guido Beltramini and Fulvio Lenzo, editors

Exhibition catalogue

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The names of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), appearing in the title of this exhibition catalogue, are well known to architectural historians in Europe and the United States. Jefferson’s architectural pursuits have been a continuous area of research since Fiske Kimball’s 1916 monograph, which was based on a systematic examination of Jefferson’s drawings.

Kimball argued that American classical architecture “traces its ancestry to Jefferson, who may truly
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be called the father of our national architecture.”¹ Meanwhile, scholars and other admirers of Palladio, who is easily one of the most studied architects in history, continue to publish on all aspects of his life and work.² Jefferson and Palladio have been studied together before, usually under the guise of tracing Palladio’s legacy for future generations of architects.³ This catalogue hews to the established conventions of this approach.

To be sure, there is much that connects Palladio and Jefferson despite their separation in time, their radically different historical circumstances, their architectural training, and the large disparity in the quantity and range of their building (Palladio far outstrips Jefferson). There is their shared interest in classicism, but there is also an abiding concern with expedient and novel building innovations. There is the fact that they are each best known for developing two building types: the villa and urban church in the case of Palladio, and the plantation-villa and the university campus in the case of Jefferson. And there is the fact that they have both been viewed by subsequent generations of architects and critics as transformational figures who forged new and lasting traditions in the art of building.

Two things must be weighed when evaluating this catalogue. First, it is directed primarily toward a European, specifically Italian, audience—an introduction of “Mr. Jefferson, architect” to an audience that is aware of but probably knows little detail about his architectural work. Hosted at the Palladio Museum in Vicenza and sponsored by the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio (CISA), the Fondazione Canova, and the Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin, the exhibition was meant to highlight one aspect of the “enduring influence of Palladio” on architecture beyond Italy. Second, the catalogue is mostly about Jefferson; Palladio is a distinctly secondary concern, being an architect with whom the local audience is, presumably, intimately familiar.

The catalogue is conceived as a gesture “of friendship and appreciation” from Italy to the United States, according to a prefatory note. This results in brief, summary essays emphasizing mostly settled views rather than new scholarship and interpretations. With this uncritical historiographical approach, the essays uniformly present a view of Jefferson that is familiar and safe: a Great Man, a visionary architectural genius, the fashioner of democratic architecture for a new nation.

Editors Guido Beltramini and Fulvio Lenzo describe the genealogy of Palladianism in architecture as beginning with Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616) in Italy and Inigo Jones (1573–1652) in England, two architects who took up “the great architect” Palladio’s methods and interest in antiquity. Most of the essays in the book follow this line: Jefferson continued to explore the classical architectural approach begun by Palladio, turning it into a vision for a national architecture in the United States.

The preface by Howard Burns, dean of Palladio scholars, sets the tone for the laudatory, almost hagiographic approach of the catalogue. He writes that Palladio “mastered and re-animated” ancient architectural forms and principles and applied them with the goal of creating a better world in his time. Over two centuries later, Jefferson became “the key fashioner of the intellectual foundations of a new view of the proper relation between governed and government and of a great new republic” and learned from Palladio that classical architecture could be a force to build a new society in the modern world. In their preface, Beltramini and Lenzo continue this track, explaining that their ambitions for the catalogue were to demonstrate the affinities between the architects, specifically by suggesting that both men shared a similar vision of building a new world based on the example of the ancients. The most interesting subsequent essays are those in which the authors go beyond this limiting framework.

The organization of the catalogue has no discernible order apart from the three introductory essays by James Ackerman, Beltramini, and Lenzo. They develop the basic ideas of the exhibition very broadly, tracing Jefferson's knowledge of Palladio, explaining his reliance on editions of Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* (among other books), and stating the case for seeing Jefferson as an exponent of democratic architecture.

In "Jefferson and Palladio," Beltramini focuses on what Jefferson found appealing and workable in Palladio's architecture. He notes that Jefferson's adoption of the Palladian "architectural system" was unsystematic, in part because of discrepancies between inside and outside, or between plan and elevation, in many of Jefferson's designs. He cites the fact that Jefferson applied varied columnar orders in his interiors in a way that is contrary to Palladio's design method. Yet, as an architectural language instead of a complete system, Jefferson's adaptation of Palladio was "passionate and generous." Some further consideration of the well-known metaphor of classicism as an architectural language might have helped distinguish more clearly the differences in Palladio's and Jefferson's design approaches. As it is, the discussion is too general to make as sharp a distinction as Beltramini insists.

Lenzo distills the connections between architecture, land, and democracy in Jefferson's vision in "Jefferson: Architecture and Democracy." Lenzo's main point is that the connection between Jefferson's politics and architecture is "a general ordering principle." Jefferson saw the land as "the load-bearing axis of democracy"—a vision in which Americans divided their territory fairly and efficiently, ensuring moral and political "harmony." A balance was struck, Lenzo believes, between the individual in society (and, concomitantly, individual parts within a building), and the collective dimension of the nation (and the whole building), a principle that he takes to be

representative of American democracy. A longer essay might have further developed this rich, if not entirely convincing, Tocquevillian idea.

The essay by Bruce Boucher, “Palladianism in America before Jefferson,” describes the Palladian tradition as gospel filtered through Scamozzi, Jones, James Gibbs, Giacomo Leoni, and others. American Palladianism was an offshoot of English developments brought about by a wave of publishing; Boucher brings to the fore the importance of books to the dissemination of Palladianism. He also very briefly suggests that Palladianism in the Caribbean and the North American colonies became intertwined with slaveholding society. Unfortunately, he quickly abandons this thought for a perfunctory rehearsal of pre-Jefferson Palladianism in America.

Richard Guy Wilson, the leading expert on the Academical Village, Jefferson’s name for his plan of the University of Virginia, provides a succinct overview of Jefferson’s architectural ideas in his essay, “Jefferson’s Creation of American Classical Architecture.” Wilson picks out several abstract themes that stand as exemplary of Jefferson’s work. Agenda refers to the emphasis Jefferson gave to training a generation of builders to combat what he described as the “rude, misshapen piles” of eighteenth-century colonial architecture. Precedent refers to specific models Jefferson studied, both ancient and modern, and how he transformed them into something new. Training suggests the ways Jefferson acquired architectural knowledge: through construction, books, and travel. Vernacular relates to the way his buildings were rooted in Virginian traditions, even while they looked to the approved classicist models across the Atlantic. Site has to do with Jefferson’s life-long interest in landscape, gardening, and the siting of a building. Finally, achievement stresses Jefferson’s creation of a national classical architecture. Although these themes are evident in Jefferson’s work, they are treated too broadly and briefly in this essay. It remains unclear why other categories—slavery, for instance, or anything to do with the social and political aspects of

architecture—are not included. Such themes would be no less Jeffersonian than the ones Wilson cites.⁴

The three essays that venture outside the Palladio-Jefferson-classicism nexus are the most interesting in the catalogue. Leaving aside the question of the appropriateness of their inclusion within this volume—their subject matter is tangential to the book’s central claims—they give texture and greater scope to the content of Jefferson’s nation-building project. Perhaps the most interesting of all is Catherine Maumi’s essay, “The National Survey Grid and the American Democracy.” She discusses Jefferson’s origination of the territorial grid system as a vehicle to diffuse democracy across the vast continent, to ensure the proper distribution of the population, and to hinder concentration in cities.⁵ Unfortunately, like the other authors she indulges in Jeffersonian romanticism when she argues that the continental grid is a symbol of Americans’ “right” to claim a plot of land as one’s own “homestead.”

Giovanna Capitelli’s “Jefferson and the First Public Statues in the United States,” and Mario Guderzo’s “Canova and the Monument to George Washington,” focus on Jefferson’s interest in sculpture. While Capitelli mentions Jean-Antoine Houdon’s *George Washington*, 1785–92, in the Virginia State Capitol, the essay treats Jefferson’s involvement in the commission of a figure of George Washington by Antonio Canova for the North Carolina State House in Raleigh. Sadly, it was destroyed in a fire in 1831 (the final plaster model is at the Gipsoteca Canoviana in Possagno, Italy). Guderzo’s chapter provides details on Canova’s working methods, as well as on the commission and the iconography of this lost sculpture.

The final pair of essays, “Palladio: Materials and Building Techniques” by Damiana Lucia Paternò, and “Jefferson Builder” by Travis McDonald, narrow the focus to building technology and materials. Like the previous pair of essays on Canova, these are too short to sufficiently develop

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their points. But they do succeed in conveying the serious interest both architects took in matters of construction, technology, and economical building. Their value in this collection is to help the reader understand how Palladio and Jefferson transformed the classical tradition with the materials and means available to them.

Many important issues are left untreated in this catalogue. Almost entirely overlooked are the ways that social roles and identities are expressed, negotiated, or constructed by architecture. For instance, contrary to the way it is presented in this catalogue, Dell Upton has written about how Jefferson's plantation villa, Monticello, should be seen as much more than an exercise in Palladian classicism. It was also, Upton writes, "a heterogeneous community" with "degrees of unfreedom" and many types of relationships with its owner. Jefferson made Monticello the patriarchal center of his social universe.⁶ His other architectural projects have not been studied in a similar manner, and none of the pertinent questions are raised in this volume. For instance, slavery is only addressed in passing, but we know a great deal about Jefferson's attitudes toward it, his relationships with individual slaves, and the material benefits the system provided him throughout his life.⁷

Architecture, as any human endeavor, can be studied in many ways. Conventionally, scholars examine how buildings fit into traditions; how architects set about posing and solving formal, constructional, and material problems; and the dynamics of the master-pupil relationship. These are the ways the Palladio-Jefferson connection is treated in this catalogue. However, there are also social and political questions beyond influence and tradition, questions which address the complex and contradictory significance of any building or landscape. The slave labor of the human beings who constructed so much of Jefferson's world is as much a part of the architectural history as his bookishness and reverence for Palladio. Likewise, we must consider the stark inequalities of Palladio's world as a factor crucial to his success in building what and where he did.

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Jefferson and Palladio: Constructing a New World addresses two audiences and they will take different things from it. For scholars of Palladio and Jefferson, none of the interpretations of well-known facts will surprise them. American architectural historians in particular will encounter old ideas they have seen elsewhere. For them, the book offers a concise, though by no means exhaustive, summary of Jeffersonian themes. For those unfamiliar with Jefferson's architecture and his debts to Palladio, the book is a helpful starting point: it is general, upbeat, and filled with good illustrations. Sometimes that is enough for an exhibition catalogue.

Notes:

¹ Fiske Kimball, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1916).

² For instance, see Guido Beltramini, *The Private Palladio*, trans. Irena Murray (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2012).

³ See, most recently, *Palladio and His Legacy: A Transatlantic Journey*, exh. cat. (Venice: Marsilio, 2010).

⁴ For a more complete treatment of these themes, see Wilson's essay, "Jefferson's Lawn: Perceptions, Interpretations, Preservation, Meanings," in *Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village: The Creation of an Architectural Masterpiece*, rev. ed. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 55–112.

⁵ Maumi has developed these ideas in greater detail in *Thomas Jefferson et le projet du Nouveau Monde* (Paris: Editions de la Villette, 2007).

⁶ Dell Upton, *Architecture in the United States* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27–28.

⁷ See, for instance, Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf, *"Most Blessed of the Patriarchs": Thomas Jefferson and the Empire of the Imagination* (New York: Liveright, 2016); Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*, 3rd ed. (1996; Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2014); and Lucia Stanton, *"Those Who Labor for My Happiness": Slavery at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

Guido Beltramini, Fulvio Lenzo. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), a cosmopolitan figure with rural roots, was a master of the knowledge of his time. He drafted The Declaration of Independence (1776), and thus founded a new view of the proper relation between governed and government. Jefferson was the architect of the new America, not just in a political sense, but in a literal sense as well. Architecture had an important place in his personal and public agenda. A self-taught architect, Jefferson buildings are amongst America's most famous: Monticello, the Virginia State Capitol and the Univer Jefferson and Palladio book. Read reviews from world's largest community for readers. The catalogue offers an opportunity to acquire a deeper understandi... of time in the countryside Published to accompany an exhibition: Jefferson and Palladio: Constructing a New World, Vicenza, Palladium Museum, 19 September 2015 - 28 March 2016 Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), a cosmopolitan figure with rural roots, was a master of the knowledge of his time. He drafted The Declaration of Independence (1776), and thus founded a new view of the proper relation between governed and government. Jefferson was the architect of the new America, not just in a political sense, but in a literal sense as well. Architecture had an important place in his personal and public age VICENZA, Italy " Perhaps the most bizarre bit of business in the multimedia exhibition "Jefferson and Palladio: Constructing a New World" is a video of an imaginary confrontation between Thomas Jefferson and Andrea Palladio, depicted as silhouettes. But for Guido Beltramini, director of the Palladio Museum in Vicenza and a curator of the exhibition, which runs through the end of March, Palladio was solely the conduit for Jefferson's vision of a new world built on the twin pillars of reason and beauty. "For Jefferson, Palladio took the great tradition of ancient Roman architecture and translated it for the purposes of the modern world, so that it could be accessible," Mr. Beltramini said by telephone.