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Author

Bell, David

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David H. Bell



I View along Lawn's east portico to the break in continuity just past Pavilion VI.
Photograph by Marc Treib.

Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia is cited often in architectural discussion as both a typological paragon and instantly acceptable precedent. Such normative contemporary notions of this work, as useful as they may be, ultimately indicate a rather shallow understanding of what it is. I believe Jefferson's purposes in the design and building of the University were beyond architecture as it is almost universally practiced today and hence assert his purposes in making this complex were to embody himself architecturally in the landscape he loved so dearly.¹ It would be precipitous to read this embodiment simply as an act of self-glorification by Jefferson; better to understand it as a gesture of mythic poetry. Of course, this all sounds cloyingly romantic to us cynics of the late-twentieth century. However, it is important to realize that the making of this place was the product not only of an idea that had persisted in him for almost forty years, but the culmination of his entire life, a life spent in pursuit of a rapprochement between multifaceted humanity and the natural world. His unique vision saw that the United States promised all its inhabitants the possibility of achieving the difficult but productive balance between individual desires, human institutions and the vast, raw American landscape, that is, Nature. The continuous

fulfillment of this promise, for Jefferson, could only be predicated on a citizenry that had in varying degrees a critical/practical education founded on the Enlightenment's marriage of empiricism and rationalism. His University, backed by his proposal for an extensive state education system, was the medium through which he believed all these values could be materially manifested for the country's future leaders.

In any of his enterprises Jefferson's greatest strength was his willingness or perhaps natural predisposition to accept, work with and make something out of seemingly irreconcilable situations. He believed firmly that by engaging fully and directly the mysteries and complexities of the world the individual could determine and establish his or her own place within it. Thought and action, knowledge and sensation were intimately related through the human body; these traits and beliefs underwrote his life-long desires to mediate the individual, human institutions and the natural world alluded to above. The University's buildings and grounds thus embody not only Jefferson but each of us who experiences them. Our understanding of this architectural situation comes about through our gestures, movements, senses, intellect and the tentative, diffuse connection of these through

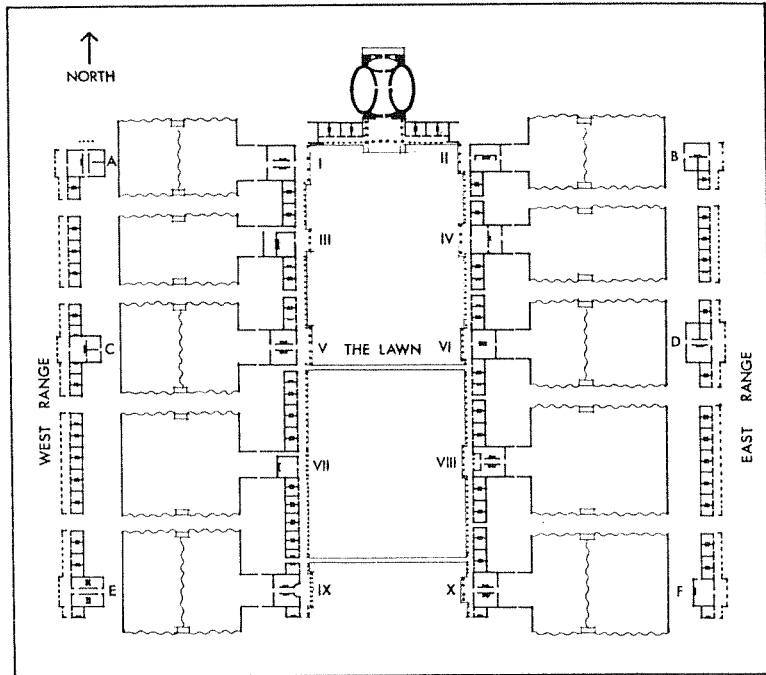
the body. It is a place resistive to a comprehensive perspectival understanding from a privileged viewpoint. It demands one's presence in it and, at the very least, one's movement through it. Such movement is both provoked and induced by the manifold lapses, breaks, inconsistencies, problematic connections, evanescent and drifting unities that pervade its architecture and might constitute Jefferson's attitude toward making architecture, which he once summarized: "It gives the greatest joy to build up and tear down."² The tentative, fluid sense suggested by this statement inhabits his University's architecture. Viewed as a geographical feature, the complex of Jefferson's University of Virginia is an assertive, extroverted and proud statement of a liberated, energetic humanity woven into the landscape as an intricate textile of spaces. This extrovertedness at the large scale is countered by innumerable, more introverted, small-scale spatial nuances. The scales constantly reciprocate with one another and the spaces themselves are expressed by the careful mediation of the individual's direct experience with both the natural and domesticated landscapes. These spaces in between along with various "unnoticed" architectural events of the University, constitute the fabric of this place as much as its architectural monuments. It

is to these former two that I wish here to direct attention.

The *individual* inhabitants of the residential quarters, which line the Lawn and the Ranges, approach the natural world directly and frontally but always through a long portico defined by a continuous screen of either columns or arches. These porticoes physically manifest the public world as variegated promenades. Their perpendicular orientation with respect to the direct connection between the individual and Nature testifies to the perpetual conflict between that individual's cultural and natural selves. The sense of this struggle throughout the entire formal/spatial order of the University—albeit an exercise in Jeffersonian optimism—is virtually unrelenting and belies one's initial impressions of the serenity of this place. Despite Jefferson's admiration for the New England village green's public significance and despite the capaciousness of the Lawn, it appears neither intended for nor does it encourage daily public congregation. This is not to say that the Lawn cannot be so used; it can and has been, but only on relatively rare occasions. The Lawn does not really merge the public world with the natural world, a merger that would comfortably mesh the social and spatial hierarchies implicit in the plan. Rather, it enforces their disjuncture.



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2 View of the Lawn from the portico on the east looking toward Pavilion VII, the first building of the University. Photograph by Marc Treib.

3 Plan of the University of Virginia

4 The edge of the Lawn, the portico and the entry of Pavilion IX. Photograph by Marc Treib.

5 Pavilion IX. Photograph by David Bell.

6 Tenuous connection between Pavilion V and the portico. Photograph by David Bell.

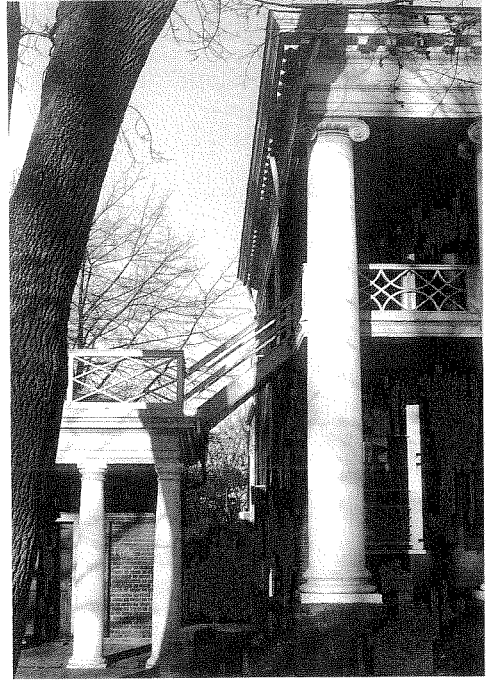
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Far from a weakness in the scheme, it is a significant constituent of its pastoral poetics, because in the recognition of this difference and the questions that arise civilization lies. (As a point of clarification, the south end of the Lawn was originally left open. The natural ha-ha of a wide ravine several hundred yards from the southernmost buildings of its perimeter physically distinguished it from the hills of the surrounding countryside. A building added to the southern edge of this plateau by Stanford White closed off this view and its potent implications.)³

Looking more closely at the colonnaded porticoes that define the Lawn's east and west boundaries, one is struck by the refinement, or rather proliferation, of the same textile quality of spatial interlocking that structures this scheme in the landscape. Yet, numerous formal problems remain uncomfortably resolved. Although easily dismissed as the obvious mistakes of an amateur, these "flaws" demand appreciation for the qualities they possess instead of those the cognescenti wish they had.⁴ Several different kinds of spatial perceptions result, a few of which I can introduce here. First, there are spaces of multiple boundaries, that is, compounded spaces, of ambiguous, disintegrating perimeters. These spaces can only be read, understood and

appropriated in relative ways. One senses and understands one's presence in any of several spaces simultaneously, all of which differ in scale and other qualities. Consider, for example, the boundary between the portico space in front of Pavilion IX and the Lawn. Is it the colonnade itself or the apron of brick paving that extends beyond it? Each testifies to the various scales at which this building exists in the entire Lawn complex, that is, each pavilion is uniquely identified by a differentiated columnar organization, yet the simple masonry apron constantly extends beyond both the pavilions and their porticoes. This apron is an almost imperceptible but profound datum common to the whole complex. Note, however, that the datum is ultimately discontinuous given the Lawn's two terrace level changes; but it also allows one to stand outside the shelter of the Lawn buildings without standing directly on the Lawn—Nature itself, Jefferson's final datum of human existence. The portico roof of this same pavilion vertically interrupts its hemispherically domed entry alcove. At first glance this alcove space gives the appearance of extending indefinitely above the portico. Moreover, its seeming autonomy with respect to the absolute datum of this roof paradoxically draws it into the larger question of challenging that absolute.

Such peculiar, some would say clumsy, boundary/juncture articulations characterize many of the portico segments between pavilions, for example, at their junctures with pavilions and where they terminate abruptly at a change in terrace level. Connections are made only by the propinquity of their respective architectures.

Further elaborations of these unsettling joints is virtually nonexistent. Consider too the entire length of both porticoes of the Lawn, which is penetrated by a total of seven passages leading from the Lawn. Five of these entail narrow vistas into the greater landscape (four from the east and one from the west, and they only occur where the land falls below the level of the Lawn). Passing any of these openings one may only be peripherally aware of them. Yet a portico column on axis with the center-line of the narrow passage closes these five passages on the Lawn side. The suggestion here of both a preferred direction and a closure, recalls the complex's entire setting and further compounds its spatial fabric.

Beyond the immediate space of the Lawn, boundary walls enclose small gardens behind each of the pavilions. These peculiar serpentine walls take their shape for practical reasons: construction stability and the protection of delicate plants. But their

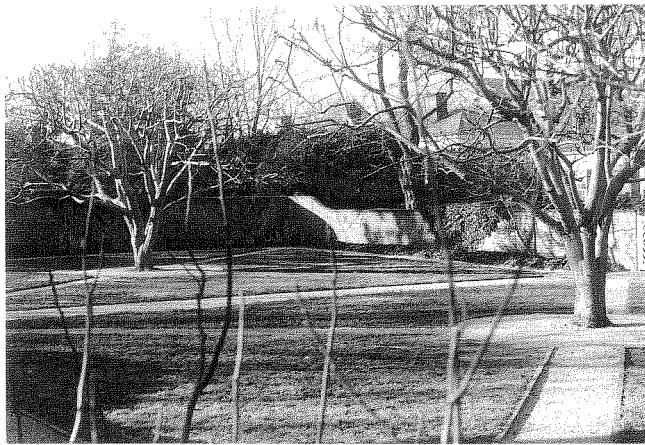
sinusoidal plan form also evokes a diffuse, dynamic, tentative boundary between the gardens. The height of these walls forecloses one's view while seated for a stronger sense of containment and inward focus. When standing up or walking, one can see into the adjacent gardens or the distant landscape, to be aware again of the larger world in which this specific smaller place exists.

Of the engaging puzzles of this place, Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, the one that permeates its every part asks whether it constitutes a unity suggested by its plan or whether it is a willful assemblage of lyrical fragments. On this matter I defer to Maurice Blanchot, who wrote of poetry: "So the fragmentary poem is not complete, but . . . opens up a different mode of completion: that mode which comes into plan in the form of expectancy, of questioning, or of an affirmation irreducible to unity."⁵



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7 View toward Lawn from the east; note portico column silhouetted in the opening. Photograph by Marc Treib.

8 Garden behind one of the Pavilions of the West Lawn. Photograph by David Bell.

Notes

- 1 For a more extended discussion see Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Architecture as Embodied Knowledge" *JAE* (Spring 1987) and David Bell, "Knowledge and the Middle Landscape: Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia" *JAE* (Winter 1983), pp. 18–26.
- 2 It is worthwhile to note that the eighteenth-century Venetian architectural theorist Carlo Lodoli assumed for himself a similar motto, "to throw down and destroy . . . to plant and to build."
- 3 The host of a recent PBS television series on architecture, when discussing the University of Virginia, stated that the space of the Lawn opened to the west to symbolize Jefferson's dream of westward expansion. This makes interesting, but incorrect speculation.
- 4 See Bell, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23, for further discussion of these phenomena.
- 5 Blanchot, Maurice *L'Entretien infini* (Paris) 1955. I ran across this quote in Tafuri, Manfredo "Carlo Scarpa and Italian Architecture" in *Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works* Electa/Rizzoli (New York) 1985 p. 77 while I was writing this article on Jefferson. The two architects have struck me as having interesting similarities in their respective approaches to their work.