

Jefferson Rejuvenation: Rebuilding a Virtuous America in the 21st Century through Politics, Discourse, and Architecture

by Rogan Motter

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Author's Signature _____
Rogan Motter

First Reader's Signature _____
Charles Kupfer, Ph.D.

Second Reader's Signature _____
John Haddad, Ph.D.

Program Chair's Signature _____
Simon Bronner, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This Master's Project asserts the relevance and critical importance of Jeffersonian architectural and political philosophy for the 21st Century. The ideas of the founding father are put forth as helpful correctives to modern political polarization and cultural stasis. Analysis of Thomas Jefferson's ideas and practices concerning residential architecture is used to support the argument that reintroduction of these principles could reinvigorate what was once defined as 'republican virtue.' The Project further contends that contemporary consumer values and commodification of architecture and construction have created a reductionist popular cookie-cutter concept of the purposes of a home, exacerbating the distance between citizens and the national body politic. This damages the basic Jeffersonian tenet which prizes an involved citizenry as intrinsic to democratic health. Thomas Jefferson's favorite retreat, Poplar Forest, provides the best example for the arguments underpinning this Project, since this home represented the culmination of Jefferson's principles. Therefore, an interpretation of how Poplar Forest exemplifies Jefferson's values provides the empirical backing for this project.

INTRODUCTION: Thomas Jefferson as Cure for Contemporary Culture

I begin with a terminological clarification for the modern audience. This Master's Project will discuss civic life and architecture within the context of Jeffersonian republicanism, a philosophy which must not be confused with the modern day Republican Party. Since 21st century civic and aesthetic culture will be addressed, the Republican and Democratic political parties will be relevant, but to differentiate today's Republican Party from small "r" republicanism, the GOP's name will always appear in capitals while republicanism – in its Jeffersonian sense -- will appear in lowercase.

Now, a declaration of intention: Throughout my studies I have continually challenged and contested the high academic writing and jargon that pervades so much of Liberal Arts, including the field of American Studies. As specialists in American Studies, we naturally nurture expertise, like every professional in their specific field. However, let's be clear: American Studies is not quantum mechanics, it is an interdisciplinary field of diversely relevant information and inquiries hovering within the all-encompassing umbrella of American culture. As such it is applicable to nearly everyone and should in turn be accessible to everyone who desires to learn from it. That is a democratic (small-'d') ethos. Our work as American Studies professionals should not be restricted to an elite academic bubble, otherwise what is the point? What is our purpose? Our work should be conceived for the dissemination of all. Academia is often criticized for being out of touch with the "real world." I do not believe this to be true, but rather argue that this is a problem of accessibility, communication and dissemination. This is my philosophy and my work herein shall reflect it.

This thesis will distill a relevant Jeffersonian philosophy for potential use in 21st century America, identifying and explaining how ‘Jeffersonianism’ is altered and presented for a modern audience. The major focus of this project is decorative arts as material culture. Concentrating on residential architecture, I will explore what Jeffersonian-relevant buildings and interiors could teach us in 2014 about republican virtue and how those lessons might be used to inspire a new sense of civic virtue among a disillusioned, disengaged citizenry living amidst a cookie-cutter culture. I consider Jefferson’s ethos a prescription for what ails current culture. In a mass consumer, material world, usually seen as a cause of cultural boredom if not actual social pathology, perhaps we can flip things around and say, “If we can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em -- for the purpose of utilizing material itself to solve the core problem.” It is an underlying idea in this project that Jeffersonian ideas still retain the power to refract and focus vision on the best parts of American founding ideals, particularly in ways likely to reach a 21st century audience. For example, environmental psychology and Jeffersonian philosophy will be integrated to offer my interpretation of aesthetic theory and architectural design, as a solution to help alleviate the ills of modern America.

There are numerous inspirations for this project, including my view that the current state of political and cultural divide in the United States is a threat to the American experiment. Though both parties bear their share of responsibility, problems are especially palpable on the political right, which contains elements of what I see as a disturbingly medieval religiosity that contradicts all that the Enlightenment stands for. A trenchant observation by blogger/pundit Andrew Sullivan sparked my thinking on this subject: “There’s effectively no Republican party

anymore. There is a radical movement to destroy the modern state and eviscerate its institutions in favor of restoring a mythical, elysian, majority-white, 19th-century past.”

I have long had a fascination with all things Thomas Jefferson. In almost all respects Jefferson embodies every fundamental American cultural conflict. He is, as historian Joseph Ellis dubbed him, the American Sphinx, a force to be psychologically reckoned with by anyone who would understand his legacy and this country’s past. Despite his many contextual hurdles, slavery and race relations in colonial and antebellum Virginia being the primary problem, the man’s work nevertheless offers a captivating intellectual and aesthetic beauty that no other founder or American philosopher has matched. His deep Enlightenment makeup with deist/secular and scientific capacities alone revive his legacy to high relevance, promoting him as the ideal model of republican virtue in the modern age. A contemporary radio program/podcast entitled, “The Thomas Jefferson Hour” seeks to examine the world through a Jeffersonian lens. Humanities scholar, author, and creator Clay S. Jenkinson portrays Mr. Jefferson discussing period and contemporary topics as well as listener questions. This enlightening program has been a great source of inspiration for me as a developing scholar since I first happened upon it 6 years ago. Jenkinson continuously argues that, had Jefferson lived with the growing nation, he would have grown with the nation and its progress. In his biography, *Thomas Jefferson: the Art of Power*, Jon Meacham makes a compelling case that despite Jefferson’s ideological front, he governed pragmatically and was more comfortable with power than he ever led on. If we accept the premises of Meacham and Jenkinson and look upon leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt as postindustrial heirs to Jeffersonianism using Hamiltonian “big government” to achieve Jeffersonian ends: national harmony and a level playing field for the ideals enumerated in the Declaration

of Independence. Progressive Republican President Theodore Roosevelt was the first to use Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends by busting monopolies and subduing big banks. Woodrow Wilson followed with his own set of domestic progressive reforms, including establishing the Federal Reserve, the Clayton Anti-Trust Act, and the nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court. All this paved the way for Theodore Roosevelt's cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, who aggressively pushed the federal government into areas where it meant to accomplish social good. Progressivism has advanced in fits and starts since then. John F. Kennedy aimed at the New Frontier, but also epitomized the Cold War liberalism which the Vietnam War would render an endangered species. Lyndon Johnson promoted an unashamed Great Society program meant to modernize and spread the original New Deal, but his domestic agenda foundered due to discontent with Vietnam. Hubert Humphrey failed narrowly to win the White House while running as a progressive Democrat. Richard Nixon actually signed numerous progressive bills, such as the Clean Water and Clean Air acts, into law, but any claim he had to progressivism was strictly contingent upon political expediency. Jimmy Carter ran as a technocrat promising honesty in government, but his national security troubles torpedoed his attempt at reelection. Bill Clinton was pragmatic above all else, willing to declare that the era of big government was over after the GOP took hold of Congress in 1994. Most recently, despite the era of hope and rebirth prophesied by Barack Obama, prompting many voters to flock to him as though he would be our savior, American culture has continued its plunge in a state of cynicism and apathy. Today, many people believe, perhaps correctly, that our political representatives are unwilling to actually represent the average citizen rather than average corporation, or that certain

politicians are devoted only to the interest of certain interest groups, rather than to the republic's well-being.

A dedicated Jeffersonian, Clay S. Jenkinson writes in his slender book, *Becoming Jefferson's People*, "That beneath the surface cynicism there is substantial and widespread willingness to engage in a national conversation about the future- then it is of some urgency that we find vehicles and forums for that conversation."¹ In this project, I propose that architecture is a material vehicle that can transport us part of the way. Much of our national life is lived in our built environment. The buildings and structures we inhabit and work in can clearly affect our individual moods, and, I argue, the national mood as well. We must again find Jefferson in the 21st century, and one way of doing this is to recall and rejuvenate Jefferson's understanding that properly conceived and constructed buildings and structures can represent and encourage civic virtues which we have lost. The private home is emphasized in this work.

As a student and lover of material culture, Jefferson's artistic values and architectural talent provide a link from aesthetics to philosophy and politics by way of civic virtue. His most individualistic villa retreat, Poplar Forest, is a just model for this study and one with which I feel a deep connection. This gets to the question of my methodology. I will utilize existing texts about Jefferson to establish his distinctiveness as a founding father. Also, I will use the Sullivan insight mentioned above as a framing device to diagnose a cultural problem of current American life. Finally, I will analyze Poplar Forest in detail, citing examples from the edifice to show how Jefferson offers insights and lessons which can steer us away from the dangers cited by Sullivan,

¹Clay S. Jenkinson, *Becoming Jefferson's People: Re-Inventing the American Republic in the Twenty-First Century* (Marmarth Press, 2005).

reinvigorate a sense of republican virtue in the best sense of the phrase. In analyzing Poplar Forest, I will combine visual culture analysis – using graphics to support my text – as well as existing materials on the venue.

Many Americans are not only disillusioned by their government, but by the attainability of the American dream itself. A recent study by an economist at University of California, Davis even denies the reality of an American Dream, claiming that social mobility is nearly non-existent in the United States across generations. Recent studies such as Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* gain great public response with arguments that upward mobility is increasingly difficult. Democracy has always been a delicate balance between individual freedom and equality, the American yin-yang, whose current equilibrium appears severely off-center, if such studies are to be believed. Without going into the debate over statistical modeling which authors use, I argue here that the very popularity of these works proves that Americans fear a loss of the social mobility which they consider their birthright. In the spring of 2014 a joint study between Princeton and Northwestern found that the federal government tilts toward the rich and powerful, not the average citizen. The BBC headline blared, "STUDY: US IS AN OLIGARCHY, NOT A DEMOCRACY."² The less pejorative phrase is "economic elite domination," but the difference is frankly semantic. Discomfort over such charges fueled the recent furor over the "One percent versus the 99 percent," which American Studies Association President Matthew Frye Jacobson made the central focus of his keynote address in the Baltimore meeting. Again, without going into the debate over this statistic, the fact that many onlookers – and clearly, most Ameri-

²John Cassidy, "Is America an Oligarchy?" *The New Yorker*, (April 2014).

can Studies professors – believe it reflexively shows that it is a powerful message with resonance.

I take this unease over elite economic domination as a starting point. In addition, American civic literacy is at a staggering all-time low, threatening democracy as much as the economic divide. According to a 2010 poll by the nonprofit Marist Institute for Public Opinion, only 26% of those surveyed could identify Great Britain as the nation from which the United States achieved its independence.³ In a more recent 2014 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the University of Pennsylvania, 35 % of respondents were not able to name a single branch of government and only 36% could identify all three. Nearly 3 out of 4 Americans did not know that it takes a 2/3 majority in each house of Congress to override a presidential veto. Only 38% correctly knew which party controls the House and Senate, and 1/5 of the public believes that if the U.S. Supreme Court decides a case by a 5-4 majority, the decision is sent to Congress for reconsideration. Also appalling is the 2012 national survey from Xavier University which found that 1 in 3 native born Americans would fail the civics portion of the naturalization test for immigrants.⁴ In a column on civic unawareness, former senator from Nebraska Bob Kerrey, notes that in the 1950s and 60s schools were required to teach civic courses. Many schools now offer only one, and it is often optional. Most high school seniors, on the brink of becoming voting citizens, cannot explain how citizen participation benefits democracy.⁵ Accounting for the

³Strauss, Valerie. “What Americans Don't Know About Their History.” *Washington Post*. (July 03, 2010). <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/civics-education/what-americans-dont-know-about.html>.

⁴“Americans’ grasp on civic knowledge is shaky at best, study finds.” *Boston Globe*. (October 01, 2014). <http://www.bostonglobe.com>.

⁵Kerrey, Bob. “Becoming Aware of Civic Unawareness.” *Huffington Post*. (May 26, 2012). <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

polling and statistical data, former Supreme Court Justice David H. Souter, appointed by President George H. W. Bush, cuts to the devastating result of the problem:

I would not expect American constitutional government to survive those kinds of statistics indefinitely under and circumstances. But certainly not now in this stage of ideological polarization of increased political spending by interest groups and corporations at a time when, for example, one of the manifestations of the health of American democracy is the increasing trend of its military into a mercenary force. I do not believe American democracy can survive in this state of civil ignorance and disengagement.⁶

In addition, voter turnout for the 2014 midterm elections was at an abysmal 33.9% the lowest turnout since World War II in 1942.⁷ American democracy is eroding from both its competing fronts: the corporate powers that manipulate the government and “the people” who are ignorant of their government.

My goal is not to reconstruct economic or civic arguments, but to see how Jeffersonian ideals in decorative arts can address and soothe American nervousness on this subject. The decorative arts play a substantial role in every culture. When industrialization led to mass production and ignited the full power of capitalism, the United States began to become a material culture in very serious ways. Mass production put more items in the hands of more people, including items purchased from or designed by others. Today, we are a nation of stuff, but much of our stuff is unfulfilling, as the Simplify Movement indicates. The average American buys junk and artificiality, which includes the so-called food they ingest, as shown by cultural critics such as Michael Pollan. This junk food is no more authentic than the trashy reality television viewers

⁶ Gavin, Robert. “Souter’s Lament: Civic Ignorance Hurts America.” (September 18, 2014). <http://www.timesunion.com>.

⁷ Jose A. DelReal. “Voter Turnout in 2014 was lowest since WWII.” *The Washington Post*. November 2014.

consume. There is of course a countervailing foodie culture which prizes fresh, quality, local ingredients and careful preparation. But it is an elite counterculture. The same might be said for quality television programming. It exists, it has fans – but reality TV still dominates the ratings.

CHAPTER I: Jeffersonian (r)epublicanism and the “divine” Connection

The influence of the Classical tradition on the American founders was intense and served as a quasi-religious guide for the establishment of the republic. In his essay on the Classical Tradition, Drew R. McCoy writes that the influence of the classics was “ubiquitous and profound” and “Even Americans who lacked formal training in the classics could not escape the intense “social conditioning” that defined America’s Augustan age. What better example, indeed, than, Lincoln’s hero George Washington, who never studied Greek or Latin, who had very little formal education at all, but who could understand himself, and the American republic, only in neoclassical terms?” McCoy goes to chart the retreat of classical influence on American culture. By the 1820’s fewer Americans accepted the relevance of antiquity to their modern politics and fewer were exposed to classical culture at all and liberally educated gentlemen were playing a less important role in public life.⁸

Thomas Jefferson was the first and foremost among the classically-minded Americans. He was a deist, which alarmed religious traditionalists of his time just as atheism in a public figure might alarm believers today. Deism granted the philosophical point of a ‘prime mover’ made famous by Aristotle and later by Aquinas. The Deist essentially believed that the Creator (the deist-preferred term for God) was a sort of celestial engineer who presumably manufactured the universe and set it in motion like clockwork, with orderly precision. This first mover then retreated as an absent observer, allowing the creation of nature (humanity included) to unfold organically. The mechanistic nature of this model also reflects the deep faith in Newtonian physics

⁸ Drew R. McCoy, “An “Old Fashioned” Nationalism: Lincoln, Jefferson and the Classical Tradition,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 23, no 1 (2002): 55-67.

and the laws of a presumably knowable universe. Jefferson's moral philosophy was grounded in nature and classical teachings. He best summarized these convictions himself:

The Universe eternal...Matter and Void alone....Gods, an order of beings next superior to man, enjoying in their sphere, their own felicities; but not meddling with the concerns of the scale of beings below them....Happiness the aim of virtue....Virtue the foundation of happiness. Utility the test of virtue....The *summum bonum* is to be not pained in body, nor troubled in mind....to procure tranquility of mind we must avoid desire and fear, the two principle diseases of the mind. Man is a free agent. Virtue consists in: 1. Prudence. 2. Temperance. 3. Fortitude. 4. Justice. To which are opposed, 1. Folly. 2. Desire. 3. Fear. 4. Deceit.⁹

The United States was specifically founded as a secular society. To be clear, this does not mean that the American people did not have faith or religious convictions, but it did, and does, mean that government should free of doctrinal religious influence. For all their human faults the American founders were wise enough to understand that the despotism of the old world was fundamentally linked to normative religious ideology. It is dishearteningly ironic that today much of western Europe is more secular than the United States of America. True, western European nations often have state religions, but their churches are empty. The United States has no official religion and its churches are full. The implications of this are many, but certainly do not disprove the wisdom of foregoing establishment of an official government-sanctioned religion. Having avoided that mistake at the founding, we should avoid drifting into it now. It was Jefferson who coined the phrase, "a wall of separation between church and state." Jefferson's views on the relationship between the people and religion are both typically lovely and naive. Reason, Jefferson believed, was built on information provided by the senses and that the senses

⁹ Carl J. Richard, "A Dialogue with the Ancients: Thomas Jefferson and Classical Philosophy and History," *The Journal of the Early Republic*, 9, no. 4 (1989): 431-455.

could rarely be deceived and never all together. In this faith he was a true follower of John Locke. Religious liberty was therefore crucial because if man were free to think as they chose, reason would succeed in leading them in the same direction. He wrote, "If thinking men would have the courage to think for themselves, and to speak what they think, it would be found that they do not differ in religious opinions as much as is supposed." In 1822, the final years of his life, Jefferson reflected upon the future of religion in his country, "I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian." A Jeffersonian regards the holy trinity as absurd and holds Jesus in esteem as the greatest moralist who ever lived, but nothing more than a mere mortal human. "The dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States" would tear down "the artificial scaffolding" erected by Jesus's biographers, and that "the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter." Jefferson was a materialist and believing Jesus was as well, wrote: "He told us indeed that 'God is a spirit,' but he has not defined what a spirit is, nor said that it is not *matter*. And the ancient fathers generally, if not universally, held it to be matter."¹⁰

For reasonable people in modern society who yearn for a new Enlightenment, the aggravation of wanting Mr. Jefferson's happy-ended theories and visions to be reality is gnawing. The late atheist scholar, Christopher Hitchens, spoke of a sort of spiritual atheism which rather defines the Enlightenment as well as a prescriptive for the 21st c. Atheists, Hitchens writes:

We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy

¹⁰ Carl J. Richard, "A Dialogue with the Ancients: Thomas Jefferson and Classical Philosophy and History," *The Journal of the Early Republic*, 9, no. 4 (January, 1989): 431-455.

and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and--since there is no other metaphor--also the soul. We do not believe in heaven or hell, yet no statistic will ever find that without these blandishments and threats we commit more crimes of greed or violence than the faithful. (In fact, if a proper statistical inquiry could ever be made, I am sure the evidence would be the other way.)¹¹

Taste is argued to be subjective, but like natural laws that govern humanity, one can argue that beauty and refinement are governed by natural laws as well. Evolutionary psychologists argue that certain forms are inherently appealing to us at the species level. This is a modern take on the older idea that beauty does have actual standards. This was certainly true for Thomas Jefferson whose aesthetic was rooted in the teachings of the Enlightenment.

Lee Quincy coined the phrase, “aesthetics of virtue,” from Jefferson’s use of aesthetic images and metaphors in his writing, his belief that humans possess an “innate sense of what we call the beautiful,” and his insistence that “the nobler kinds” of art, are those “which arouse the best feelings of man, which call him into action, which substantiate his freedom, and conduct him to happiness.” As America’s foremost enlightened renaissance man, Mr. Jefferson found great delight and peace in harmony, beauty and order. Quincy observes that Jefferson’s place in the history of ideas is in fact more ambiguous than he is given credit, arguing that he was “almost as enthusiastic as were the Romantics for disorder, disharmony and irregularity. Embracing these contradictory ideals of rationality and romanticism, Jefferson attempted to advance the cause of virtue by enlisting romanticism in the service of enlightenment.”¹² This observation is

¹¹ Christopher Hitchens. “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2007.

¹² Quincy, Lee. “Thomas Jefferson: The Virtue of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Virtue.” *The American Historical Review*, 87, no. 2 (1982): 337-356.

further substantiated by Christopher Hitchens, who was quick to clarify that Jefferson's use of religious language was meant only as metaphor to convey a specific sentiment. For example, "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of god if ever he had a chosen people." God and nature were synonymous for the deist Jefferson and his architectural skills too were used to convey sentiments of harmony. The translation of this oft quoted phrase is: nature is god and humanity is a product of nature, therefore those whose body and mind partake in nature have a heightened sense of existence, which we now know is substantiated by modern psychology. The expression of sentiment was an extension of romanticism. Indeed Jefferson's architecture emerged from nature, not in the later Frank Lloyd Wright sense, but such that he employed the laws of nature in his designs, and thus the natural laws of aesthetics. On the subject Quinby wrote, "humanity is an integral part of nature's harmony. Reciprocally, humanity is incomplete without nature, for nature provides the vision that thrusts its observers into a passionate response." Speaking to his romanticism, perhaps unknowingly, Jefferson described himself in 1798 as one, "who considers social harmony as the first of human felicities, and the happiest moments those which are given to the expressions of the heart," thus expressly linking the three H's happiness, harmony and heart.¹³ Another frequently quoted Jefferson passage takes on an equally powerful meaning when applied to this more "rational" criteria: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever." This eerie message is in reference to the institution of slavery to which Jefferson was a guilty partner. Since god is nature and liberty is a natural right of man, then nature will ultimately win out in the end and, in keep-

¹³ Quinby, Lee. "Thomas Jefferson: The Virtue of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Virtue." *The American Historical Review*, 87, no. 2 (1982): 337-356.

ing with the religious metaphor, all hell will break lose for those who defied it. It especially strikes a lightning bolt when one defines human nature as the pursuit of happiness, like Thomas Jefferson. In this regard Jefferson's view of nature remained firmly planted in the terrifying.

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury is credited with the beginnings of romanticism. He was widely popular in Jefferson's time and with the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and contributed to the dissemination of the concept of humanity's innate moral sense, a keynote of Jeffersonian thought. Shaftesbury's fusion of ethics and aesthetics served as an impetus for emulation. The Earl encouraged the cultivation of virtue by use of aesthetic language to defend and promote moral convictions and for him the connection was more than metaphorical believing that both art and virtue strive toward the harmony found in nature. Nature, where "symmetry and proportion" are found and where "virtue has the same fixed standard," and beauty and truth are the same because, "the most natural beauty in the world is honesty and moral truth. For all beauty is truth." So like the ancient Greeks, Shaftesbury agreed with the ideal that good conduct and moral action lead to aesthetic harmony. Jefferson practiced the ideal as well, and not just privately for he implored King George III in *Rights of British America*, "open your breast, sire, to liberal and expanded thought...It behooves you,...to think and to act for yourself and your people. The great principles of right and wrong are legible to every reader; to pursue them requires not the aid of many counselors. The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest." The true art of government he argued, would bring about "the restoration of that tranquility for which all must wish" and would "establish fraternal love and harmony

through the whole empire.”¹⁴ Just imagine if we lived by these words- in a world where truth, fact and reason ruled the day rather than politicization, party gaming points and capitalist greed. An early American essay (1744) on taste, by an unknown “late” author, draws a useful connection between virtue and aesthetic taste. The author writes, “Like men of ambition and narrow fortune, we counterfeit the gaiety we can never purchase; and frugally flatter ourselves, that our tinsel will be mistaken for the real gold it was intended to imitate.” It is appropriately amusing that an essay of this vintage can speak so well of America’s current inauthentic cook-cutter culture and the abandonment of virtue and human genuineness for superficiality and pretense. Authenticity implies the presence of vulnerability and few people are comfortable or confident enough to allow their “vulnerability of truth” to be seen by others since we live in a society that regards too much display of authenticity as weak or inappropriate. “Nothing is too common, as the affectation of taste; and hardly any thing is so seldom found.” However, when one expresses and permeates good taste through etiquette, genuineness and design, I have personally found that it initiates a release in others to do the same. This is when Enlightenment “self design” meets artistic design for the betterment of humanity. It is when the discipline of Thomas Jefferson and his beloved Enlightenment become achievable, through the Golden Rule, which then translates into authentic artistic taste. “Taste is the heightener of every good science, and the polish of every virtue: tis the friend of society, and the guide to knowledge’...In a word, tis the assemblage of all propriety, and the centre of all that’s amiable.” Taste, “Comprehends the whole circle of civility

¹⁴ Quinby, Lee. “Thomas Jefferson: The Virtue of Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Virtue.” *The American Historical Review*, 87, no. 2 (1982): 337-356.

and good manners, and regulates life and conduct, as well as theory and speculation.”¹⁵ In an essay on “American Sublime” by art critics Earl Powell and Barbara Novak, the concept of the romantic, or transcendental sublime, is described as emphasizing the “spiritual calm” and the “illusion of space, infinity, and quiet” adding that “a contemplative view of nature displaced terror and majesty.” Jefferson certainly adopted this view of the natural sublime in relation to the arts and the goodness of humanity.

The problem with Jeffersonianism, however, is that that it is built on an optimistic facade- that humanity is inherently good and vices can be subdued by strict discipline alone. Man’s individualistic efforts and achievements in growth and self betterment must not be marginalized, however, the sciences teach us that that humanity as a species is a combination of both good and bad. The Great Hitchens is again keen to describe the scientific wonder that the human species is biologically only a partly rational creature with adrenal glands too small and “reproductive organs apparently designed by committee” all of which are certain to lead to some amount of unhappiness and disorder. It must be understood that my religious criticism is not meant to disparage the average faithful American who despises extremism as much as the next person trying to maneuver their complicated lives, but rather my issue is with those on the far right in the medieval vein of Ted Cruz, Sarah Palin, Rick Perry, Rick Santorum and Michelle Bachman, etc. Those who have perverted the Republican party beginning in the Reagan era with rise of the Christian right. The shallowness of the fundamentalists is ironically paired with (what must be) an exhausting rigor to continually defend that which is empirically impossible for the sake of bigoted, anti-democratic politics.

¹⁵ A Late Author, “An Essay on Taste,” *The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (1744).

The pursual of Darwinism, as rational substitute for dogma is far less strenuous in that it results in something empirically real, an enlightenment both intellectual and “spiritual” far beyond religious mythology. The difficult work of the scientific method: inquiry, proof, and demonstration is “infinitely more rewarding, and has confronted us with findings far more “miraculous and “transcendent” than any theology.” Hitchens goes on to boldly and refreshingly assert that the so-called “leap of faith” is actually too much for the human mind to endure and results in delusions and manias. Devotion to the natural scientific world offers more majesty than any human-conceived fable could endeavor to, no matter how old. At this risk of over quoting Mr. Hitchens, these words are far too eloquent to resist:

If you devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful--and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding--than any creation or “end of days” story. If you read Hawking on the “event horizon,” that theoretical lip of the “black hole” over which one could in theory plunge and see the past and the future (except that one would, regrettably, and by definition, not have enough “time), I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive “burning bush.” If you examine the beauty of the double helix, and then go on to have your own genome sequence fully analyzed, you will be at once impressed that such a near-perfect phenomenon is at the core of your being, and reassured (I hope) that you have so much in common with other tribes of the human species--“race.”¹⁶

At the non-dogmatic, spiritual core of religion is the natural idea of connectedness, a beautiful concept that is both religious and secular. It is with great detriment that this most universal sacred belief, has been tattered and tarnished by the Christian right in the political and sacred public (small d) democratic sphere. Sam Harris addresses the situation in his expected bluntness:

¹⁶ Christopher Hitchens. “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2007.

We elect presidents and legislators who speak with terrifying certainty about an imaginary God, and with disgraceful ignorance about established science. This must change. America is now the world's lone superpower. If the idea of "America" is to mean anything at all, Americans have a moral responsibility to become citizens of the 21st century.¹⁷

¹⁷ Sam Harris, "The Future of the American Idea," *The Atlantic*, 2007.

CHAPTER II: Pursuit of Happiness and the Individual

A spiritual scientism is, or has the potential to be, the nucleus for a new Enlightenment and a rebirth of humanity and politics. The question becomes how do we rebuild Jeffersonianism on a foundation of spiritual scientism? The “Sage of Monticello” was accused of having his head in the clouds, fast asleep in “philosophical tranquility,” but for all of Mr. Jefferson’s lofty utopianism he nonetheless understood from a pragmatic standpoint that human nature is not fundamentally good and though he believed in the perfectibility of man, he was not so delusional to take a literal stake in the belief, but rather it is the pursuit of perfectibility that makes a man, and thus society, great. It is not enough to pursue happiness alone, that leaves too many ingredients for selfishness and corruption. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In his Declaration of Independence Jefferson’s “pursuit of happiness” is not limited to private happiness, but specifically accounts for a public happiness necessary for the function and survival of a republic. We mythologize the Declaration as though it were yet another stone tablet sent from above, but one must not forget that it is a political document in which the famous preamble is a preliminary charter for a new government and civic society. (The remainder is little more than a list of indictments against King George III.) The ideals espoused in the Declaration’s preamble are the very thing that constitutes Jefferson’s immense beauty securing him at the top of the American pantheon, and Mount Rushmore for that matter. The “Jefferson music” as described by Clay Jenkinson, is, and will hopefully remain, part of American political and philosophical character which serenades us through our grossest cynicism and disillusionment.

The United States is the only nation founded upon the highest of ideals: of human dignity, equality and achievement. We forget this, but when we realize it, knowing what we now scientifically understand about humanity, how can we possibly live up to the standards set forth in our founding documents? Our founding ideals, best enumerated by Jefferson along with race and slavery, is what makes the Jefferson paradox, and thus the American paradox itself. Simultaneously, tremendous progress has been made over the past 239 years toward the equality of gender, race and sexual orientation, but will we ever reach “enough progress”? America is the pursuit of humanity’s highest ideals and the bar was set so high from our founding that when we fail to live up to those standards we are inevitably frustrated and hurt. Americans are aware of the contradiction, at least in some abstract sense, and much of the world judges us for our contradictions. With the bar set so high it is really unavoidable. Thomas Jefferson lived from 1743 to 1826. He did not live to see the Civil War or the destructive horrors of the 20th c that so eroded Enlightenment belief in the goodness of humanity: Stalin, Hitler, Hiroshima, and now Al Queda and ISIS in the 21st century. Clay Jenkinson also adds with refreshing directness:

If Jefferson could believe that all rational beings see the benevolence of things, a similarly confident social observer today might argue that all rational beings must be disenchanted realists- believers that humankind is born to botch the world....Many of his ideas made sense in his own time and place, when, in Jefferson’s terms, the continent was a tabula rasa waiting to be inscribed with whatever civilization the American People could agree to create, but those same ideas are harder to maintain now that we have become an urban-industrial, consumerist, world empire.¹⁸

The theory of public happiness goes back to Aristotle who wrote: “What constitutes a polis is an association of households and clans in a good life, for the sake of attaining a perfect

¹⁸ Clay S. Jenkinson, *Becoming Jefferson’s People: Re-Inventing the American Republic in the Twenty-First Century* (Marmarth Press, 2005).

and self sufficing existence....The end and purpose of a polis is a good life, and the institutions of social life are means to that end.” Virtuous individuals must come together to achieve public happiness and virtue can be partly achieved through civility, the practice of civic humanism which holds that the most important aspect of governance is the individual good character of public servants and citizens alike. Living a virtuous life results in good character and good character leads to happiness. At the very least it leads to overall civility and a more stable aura of peace. The lack of virtuous civility is a massive cause of the American crisis today. John Locke, a Jefferson favorite, believed that man was born to *become* good and since goodness did not magically or automatically come about, it had to be developed through education and nurture and then have its greatest manifestation in civic participation. Man’s enemy was not innate evil, but moral laziness and degeneracy. Once again, the American founders’ commitment to action and secularism dispensed with the temptation to create an abstract metaphysical system about human nature, believing that the consequences of human nature could be worked out in the everyday lives of the people. One of the more valid propositions of classical republicanism is innate uniqueness, which asserts that by nature each individual is unique and the attainment of happiness requires each individual to actualize his or her innate uniqueness. Thus virtues remain constant through time and cultures and are strengthened when each individual expresses their uniqueness. This proposition gets directly to the crux of the 21st c crisis on both a political and cultural level. In an essay on “The Civic Good,” authors David K. Hart and N. Dale Wright offer a poignant insight that individualism has played an extremely important part of American intellectual history, but to our detriment has been “kidnapped by those of a utilitarian bent and in-

terpreted as the supreme manifestation of self-interest.”¹⁹ Politically the “innate uniqueness” proposition negates the preposterous notion of “every man for himself” because that does not result in public, or individual happiness for humans as a whole are social creatures depending upon each other to a certain extent. Culturally, it emphasizes individual uniqueness: the diversity of talents, ideas, choices and environments.

The basic moral premise of civility and the role of an individual citizen may be foremost among Jeffersonian republicanism. The man himself, despite his seedy backstabbing of John Adams, is likely the greatest exemplar of civility that the United States has ever known. The ferocious current political divide is a fine example of when civility completely breaks down and leaves the once great republic paralyzed and deformed as a result. As described previously, the simplicity of the age old Golden Rule is powerful. Thomas Jefferson’s manners, meticulously balanced bi-party exquisite dinner parties, and melodic writing are examples we all should wish were still followed. Following the bitter partisan decade of the 1790s, Jefferson evoked a tone of graciousness and unification in his first inaugural address, “We are all federalists, we are all republicans.” Incidentally, one can in retrospect interpret this as a reflection of the pragmatic leadership he would come to show. We have largely become a nation of individuals without “citizenship” in the Jeffersonian sense of the term. President Kennedy drew from Jeffersonian citizenship when he famously stated “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” This implies a symbolic, equality driven gift which stands in contrast to the

¹⁹ David K. Hart and N. Dale Wright, “The Civic Good”: “The Public Interest” of Civic Humanism,” *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 20, No. 4 (1998): 406-421.

immediate aftermath of 9/11 2001 when the nation was united, but was told to spend money. Jefferson would be appalled by the defining of Americans as consumers rather than civic individuals. Clay Jenkinson, in character as Jefferson, described:

If you're not prepared to sacrifice your own private pursuit of happiness for the commonwealth, then you're not a citizen. If society exists with radically individualistic people who are only participating in it for the things it can do for them, but without any sense of civic responsibility, this can not in any meaningful sense be called a republic.²⁰

Jenkinson writes as himself:

To behave passively toward government is to abdicate the idea of self-government and to give tacit approval to the independent validity of government. Jefferson intended government to be a genuine extension of the people, not a permanent institution that has its own dynamics, which can exist apart from a continual supply of support from the people.²¹

Modesty. Here we have yet another common word whose concept is all but vaulted in the pantheon of antiquity. Modesty implies a sensitivity to the feeling and situations of others and the overt selfishness and often arrogance in modern culture may be an under appreciated cause of the decline in American political and social society. Certainly it is fueled by reality television and social media which are antitheses of modesty. As a man of fortunate circumstances who has wanted for nothing, I have the ability to speak to modesty from a deeply personal place. I look upon the great Franklin D. Roosevelt as a model practitioner of modesty in his politics. Despite Roosevelt's great personal wealth he governed the nation by governing his own self class-interests. Like Jefferson he was a president for the people, guided by the principles of the Declaration observing self modesty for the betterment of the average individual. The Repub-

²⁰ "Qualities of a Good Citizen." Clay S. Jenkinson. *The Thomas Jefferson Hour*. November 11, 2007.

²¹ Clay S. Jenkinson, *Becoming Jefferson's People: Re-Inventing the American Republic in the Twenty-First Century* (Marmarth Press, 2005).

lican argument that more progressive taxation on the most wealthy is a punishment for their (and other financially successful Americans) success and achievements is not only ludicrous, but it demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of societal mechanics. Furthermore, Republicans make no effort to explain and defend this criticism to the American people, they leave it to be accepted at face value without any evidentiary justification, but the immodest selfish fall in line. The politicization of empirical facts, be it economics or environmental science, is the full suspension of modesty and rational graciousness in favor of moneyed self interests. The most ardent “freedom” lovers are ironically more often the most aristocratic and monarchical. Thomas Jefferson taught us the necessity for the practice of the fine virtuous art of modesty and woe to the mighty Lincoln whose virtuous party has long been lost. Woe to the people, particularly the youth, who know not of virtuous modesty at all.

One need know only little about our Thomas Jefferson to recognize he was a confusing character. Sage Jefferson ceaselessly wrote and spoke to his highest ideals and aspirations as an individual and as a nation, but when it actually came down to the practice of the nitty-gritty he proceeded with a sense of practicality and consequently when all of his melodic language is taken at face value it is no wonder that he so often receives the label “contradictory hypocrite.”

Neuroscientist and spiritual atheist Sam Harris takes an up-to-date scientific approach to morality and the pursuit of happiness which jives fairly well with Jefferson’s 18th c scientific interpretation. Harris claims that morality is about “maximizing well-being (or happiness) and that well-being entails a wide range of cognitive/emotional virtues and wholesome pleasures.” When speaking about human and animal well-being Harris is sure to emphasize the facts that are quantifiable and scientific, concerning neurophysiology. Harris does, however, agree with Hitchens

and Jefferson that words with religious connotations, like spiritual and mystical, are useful in conveying emotional sentiments that are otherwise difficult to describe without depriving that sentiment of its power. The amount of happiness in an individual is a function of what is taking place in that person's brain or entire body and that function can in principle be empirically measured. The total amount of happiness/well-being is a function of all the human brains in the world. "The job of morality" Harris argues, "is to specify what that function is, measure it, and derive conditions in the world under which it is maximized." Harris is effectively describing Jeffersonianism through the lens of modern science that was unknown to Thomas Jefferson himself. In unknowingly describing Jeffersonian republicanism, Harris illuminates its now known flaws based on a tainted link between morality and happiness. "To say that morality is arbitrary (or culturally constructed, or merely personal), because we must first assume that the well-being of conscious creatures is good, is exactly like saying that science is arbitrary (or culturally constructed, or merely personal), because we must first assume that a rational understanding of the universe is good. We need not enter either of these philosophical cul-de-sacs."²² In essence, it is not that morality has no relationship to happiness, but that relationship cannot be predicated on the false notion that humanity and the universe are inherently good. This is a scientific justification for the use of Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends.

Small "r" republican government is, in theory, a legitimate extension of the people, accurately representing their interests. Thanks to gerrymandered congressional districts, and especially private and corporate wealth, republican government has been shattered into millions of

²² Harris, Sam. "Toward a Science of Morality." *Huffington Post*. (February 1, 2015). <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

shards to be bought and sold like commodities in the marketplace. This corruption is so systemically engrained that the chances of these bought-and-sold-legislators acting to correct the failure of republicanism through the very process that they ravaged, is practically non-existent. The political answer for alleviating the condition of mankind has been the use of government to promote equality and opportunity, faulty religion has been used to alleviate the tensions of existence, but how do we address our human shortcomings from a cultural standpoint? How can a marginalized citizenry find civic virtue? Surely it makes some sense that one's living environment in the form of built architecture and spiritual scientism plays a significant role in civic-world outlook.

CHAPTER III: Jeffersonian Aesthetic Thought

The decorative arts play a substantial role in the DNA and authenticity of every society. Though young by European and Asian standards, America possesses a diversely rich history of decorative arts, the most poetic of material cultures. For a man of methodical record keeping, Thomas Jefferson did not leave any dissertations on architectural criticism or design, but a thorough look at his designs and monumental library tells us plenty about his aesthetic philosophy as does his views on nature addressed previously. Henry Home, known as Lord Kames, may have been the most influential on Jefferson's views of art. Kames advocated the belief in innate beauty and virtue and he applied his moral and aesthetic philosophy to literature, architecture, painting, sculpture and landscape gardening and helps cast light onto Jeffersonian aesthetics. On a "List of Books for a Private Library" that Jefferson compiled as must-haves for Robert Skipwith in 1771, three titles topped the list: Lord Kame's *Elements of Criticism*, Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and William Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). Edmund Burke's essay on the sublime argued that human passions, particularly sympathy, are the source for human ideas of beauty and sublimity. Jefferson's documented high recommendation of this work provides a concrete substantiation between his melding of Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies. However, speaking generally about the two movements, aesthetics was a realm in which seemingly romantic sensibilities, like emotion rather than rationality, seeped into Enlightenment thought.²³

²³ Kenneth Haftertepe, "An Inquiry into Thomas Jefferson's Ideas of Beauty." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59, no. 2 (2000): 216-231.

In an essay from 1959 on the psychology of aesthetics, author Michael Wallach proposes a definition of art:

A work of art...may be defined as an organization of information according to a set of rules, where the construction, tracing, or observation of this organization (composing, performing, and perceiving or hearing an art work respectively) serves to alter a person's motivational state in way sought by the individual . What do we mean by information? Anything that impinges on a sense organ and/or that can be entertained in the mind.

Again, we see the connection of science and emotion emphasizing emotional response as primary for aesthetic success. It is therefore the goal of science and aesthetic theory to create works that warrant an emotional response. Tract houses no doubt intentionally lack these virtuous qualities since a motivational aesthetic stimulus can only empower the people, thus siphoning corporate dominance.²⁴

Burke touted “feminine” qualities, smallness, smoothness, gradual variation and delicacy as inspiration for beauty. By contrast he described “masculine” qualities of power, vastness, infinity, magnitude, and magnificence as the inspired ideas of the sublime. Lord Kames was a follower of Francis Hutcheson, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow whose *Inquiry into the Originals of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) melded the idealism of the Earl of Shaftesbury (from previous section) with the empirical method of John Locke.

Hutcheson, like Burke, argued that the most important ideas of beauty and virtue are simple ones rather than reasoned ones. Lord Kames applied this principle to plays, poetry, novels, paintings, landscape gardening and architecture. A full chapter in *Elements of Criticism* was devoted to “Gardening and Architecture.” Kames argued for two types of beauty, intrinsic and rel-

²⁴ Michael Wallach, “Art, Science, and Representation: Toward an Experimental Psychology of Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 18, no. 2 (1959): 159-173.

ative. Intrinsic beauty is the idea that certain qualities in the material world stimulate the innate sense of beauty, qualities like nature. For example, he suggested that the windings of a serpentine river inspired beauty, but equally believed that good proportions of a building or column could also inspire beauty. This type of beauty utilized simplicity and sensation which did not require the faculties of rationality, but was “self evident” to anyone whose sense of beauty was not impaired. The formal qualities that stimulated the sense of beauty were “uniformity amidst variety.” Architectural uniformity meant regularity, order, and proportion. Variety was achieved with ornament and the breaking up of overly large forms. Kames wrote, “We are framed by nature to relish proportion” and that “in buildings intended to please the eye, proportion is not less essential than regularity and uniformity.” Relative beauty, the second type of beauty, is “founded on the relation of objects.” For Kames, intrinsic beauty was highly formalistic and dependent upon human sensibility, whereas relative beauty was comparative and dependent upon reason. A contemporary of Kames, Claude Perrault, argued that the proportion of each order of column was actually arbitrary and that the beauty of the proportion was simply the result of custom and tradition. Kames rebuked this assertion:

(It) betrays ignorance of human nature, which evidently delights in proportion, as well as in regularity, order, and propriety. But without any acquaintance with human nature, a single reflection might have convinced him of his error; that if these proportions had not originally been agreeable, they could not have been established Custom. If a thing is universal, it must be natural.

Thomas Jefferson’s conviction that all people possess a distinct sense of morality and beauty followed those of Kames. In a letter to his nephew Peter Carr, who was about to begin studying with Jefferson’s old mentor George Wythe, uncle Jefferson wrote:

Man was destined for society. His morality therefore was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his nature as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality.

Jefferson also expressed his belief in a sense of beauty distinct from that of moral sense:

We have indeed an innate sense of what we call beautiful, but that is exercised chiefly on subjects addressed to the fancy. [Beauty might be perceived] through the eye in visible forms, as landscape, animal figure, dress drapery, architecture, the composition of colors, etc., or to the imagination directly, as imagery, style, or measure in prose or poetry, or whatever else constitutes the domain of criticism or taste, a faculty entirely distinct from the moral one.²⁵

I do not discount the Kamesean/Jeffersonian concept of an innate sense of beauty. I would defy anyone who gazes upon Glacier Bay, the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and yes, Monticello, to deny an innate reverence for their beauty. I posit that our innate sense of beauty in relation to modern material things has been corrupted by corporate mass produced faux homes and objects.

²⁵ Kenneth Haftertepe, "An Inquiry into Thomas Jefferson's Ideas of Beauty," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59, no. 2 (2000): 216-231.

CHAPTER IV: The Architectural Dilemma: The 20th and 21st Centuries

When industrialization led to mass production and ignited the full power of capitalism the United States became a materialistic and consumer-based culture. To say that mainstream American housing in 2014 falls within the category of decorative arts is not just false but an insult to the legacy of American decorative art. Architecture is said to be the great demonstrator of a society's strength and character, and American architecture from the 17th c to the mid-20th c is a testament to it. The decorative arts play a substantial role in every culture.

With the newly industrialized nation brought on by the Civil War, the United States centennial celebration of 1876 ignited the Colonial Revival (CR) movement in which Americans began harkening back to their colonial past to establish a national identity. The desire for a distinct American style different from European models was not simply a design movement, but an intellectual one as well. It had been going on in one fashion or another since the founding, but now it took on a new form. Modernist architecture was introduced at the turn of the 20th century by architects such as Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Anti-modernists such as Chicago critic Stephen Denison Peet argued that “the decorating of a steel frame and making making a big ornamental box is not architecture.” But Sullivan countered that a commercial building should look like what it was, and be unapologetic about its purpose. This became his defense of the skyscraper, a truly American architectural innovation but one far removed from Jefferson's original vision. After all, people tend not to live in commercial buildings. A home is not an office. The hope for a more domestic American style would lie in private homes that would be an “outgrowth of the patterns which we have inherited from England and have embodied in the old

colonial buildings.”²⁶ The Colonial Revival was not about recreating pure colonial designs, but was a fusion of the Georgian and Federal styles with modern sensibilities and imaginary-nostalgic liberties. Craftsman architecture arose in response to Victorian excess and the Colonial Revival arose as the answer to both Victorian revival styles and modernism of the early 20th century. The Progressive movement was a widespread effort to achieve change in business, politics and society itself. It was a response to the problems of industrialization, urbanization and ethnic tension. The underlying idea of Progressivism was that proper application of policy could uplift society. Along with that went faith that decision-making improved with experience. Progressivism combined with the Colonial Revival and broadened the appeal of CR houses for the middle class. As you will find in the following chapter, the progressive design philosophy shared common elements with Thomas Jefferson’s design for Poplar Forest. A Winterthur article on Progressivism and the CR states:

Inherent in the principle was a corresponding simplification of life. Progressives thought that a more modest life-style was therapeutic against the negative effects of overworking, overcrowding, and overburdening of modern industrial life. They urged members of the middle class to adopt the new manner of living, which included discriminating consumption, elimination of clutter, personal contentment, aesthetic simplicity, and a preference for rural ways over urban ways....Progressives asserted that people had a moral responsibility to select honest materials and furnishing for their homes and maintained that honest environments created truthful and virtuous individuals who would, in turn, cause a more upright modern society. Faith in the power of environments to influence inhabitants was a characteristic of nineteenth century thought that progressives embraced.²⁷

²⁶ William B. Rhoads, “The Colonial Revival and American Nationalism,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 35, no. 4 (1976): 239-254.

²⁷ Bridget A. May, “Progressivism and the Colonial Revival: The Modern Colonial House, 1900-1920,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, 26, no. 2/3 (1991): 107-122.

This progressive design utilizes what we now call environmental psychology. Others might prefer the contemporary Chinese phrase *feng shui*, or the technocratic word ‘ergonomics.’ Whatever term we pick, the idea is that our physical surroundings and the design of the things we use affects for better or worse. Many argue that the CR continues to this day and I do not dispute this claim, but believe that the “colonial” notion has become either subtler or much cheaper. Corporate “colonial” cookie-cutters have no right to be designated as virtuous Colonial Revivals.

A note on corporations: The United States would not be a world power without its big businesses and millions of people would also not have jobs should corporations not exist. Corporations are not inherently bad and should not be demonized as such. The problem, however, is the dangerous governmental influence that powerfully-moneyed corporations have come to yield. Poor behavior and lack of regulation in regards to greedy influence greatly accounts for the stripping of virtue from the former republic. The Citizens United decision and the incestuous relationship between politicians and corporate interests does not threaten democracy and individuality; it has largely already defeated it. Some see little to no distinction between corporate America and the United States government.

To say that mainstream American housing in 2014 falls within the category of decorative arts is insult to the legacy of American decorative art. Such is my argument in this thesis. Today our mass-conforming consumer culture has spawned subdivisions; sterile, plastic, cookie cutter boxes that citizens call home. Mainstream America has ditched architecture as a decorative art and has accepted mere material structures in its place. Middle Americans even imagine the McMansion as their “American Dream” home without knowing any better. These design-less boxes are devoid of virtue, spirit and authenticity. Are such homes producing drone citizens with re-

duced individualism? Are these living environments, without architecture, symptoms of a disengaged, unintellectual citizenry, or are they the cause? At the very least, we must suspect that these homes are not doing what they could to cultivate a better, engaged citizenry. That is a missed opportunity. In an article from 1864 critiquing the Victorian revival styles of the day, the author grapples with the same aesthetic dilemma:

Architecture, to be good, must be appropriate- expressive of the spirit of the age. It should be an epitome of the nation's progress, an abstract of its guiding principles, condensed, as it were, and crystallized into an art....Suppose that, in searching the ruins of ancient Greece, we found nothing but pusillanimous, sham imitations of Egyptian art. Would we not despise such a paltry method of making matter serve for mind²⁸

The “imitation” that the author speaks of in reference to the architecture of the late 19th c reflects the animosity of imitation in 20th-21st Century homes that caricature “colonial,” “craftsman” and “Victorian” houses. We have the luxury of looking back upon 1860s architecture and recognizing sturdy craftsmanship and artistry, even if the styles were not particularly republican in a classical sense. It is unfathomable that in another 150 years we will look back upon suburban houses with the same respect. We may instead vision ruins of fiberglass. A 1745 periodical article, writing in republican language when the British-American colonies and their mother country were still more or less harmoniously united, addresses authenticity and truth as a bettering of humanity:

Is there a better quality in human nature, than an honest disposition to improve the understanding of others? Has any action more beneficence in its appearance or tendency? and does any thing more deserve to be encouraged?²⁹

²⁸ “The Development of American Architecture.” *The Continental Monthly; Devoted to Literature and National Policy (1862-1864)*, (1864): 466.

²⁹ “Of Freedom of Opinion and Advice,” *The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, (1745): 161.

In the early days of the United States the nation “endured as an act of intellectual faith. The republic was not only a form of government; it was a form of government resting upon a philosophy of culture.” This statement implies that our current predicament, the failure of American government is a direct result of a degraded societal culture. After all, in a representative democracy the government is, in theory an extension of the people. The obvious conclusion (though partial as circumstances are seldom black and white) is that government is a symptom of the problem, not the cause.

You have but to study the many proposals for an American educational system in which these forty years abound, to discover that philosophic thinkers were trying to pass beyond patriotism into a doctrine of republican humanism, a program to spread civic virtue among the citizenry, virtue without which, they rightly thought, the republic could not long endure.³⁰

Today’s concern over economic inequality in the midst of generalized economic well-being reminds us of the concerns about the survivability of a democratic republic. The current state of America (and its architecture) is mirrored by an 1864 essay, written in the midst of civil war, in which the writer proclaims:

We are not warmed, as yet, with any love for art. We are too much absorbed in the rapid accumulation of wealth, or the passing excitement of the hour, to attend to anything that is noble or honest or beautiful. And now that devastating war is sweeping through the land and clogging the wheels of progress, we are learning terrible lessons; but, with experience for our teacher, learning them well. Where war prevails, civilization for the time must stand still. ³¹

³⁰ Howard Munford Jones, “Republican Humanism,” *Social Research*, 21, no. 2 (summer 1954): 159-178.

³¹ “The Development of American Architecture,” *The Continental Monthly; Devoted to Literature and National Policy*, (1864); 5.

One could argue that the aesthetic taste level of the average American may be low due to over-exposure to mediocrity rather than fine style. Or one could argue that refined taste is the provenance of the elite. But either contention works against Jefferson's faith that a people can be enlightened. Renowned American antiques dealer and decorative arts scholar Joseph Kindig III once told me, "If you surround yourself with mediocrity, that's all you will ever know." Mainstream exposure only to mediocrity is not a conscious choice, but one imposed by the mass-production of houses and decorative objects, the prepackaged, affordable norm. This is always tricky territory because of subjectivity. It is also tricky because of price. But I do not believe that expensive housing is best. Instead, I argue that intentionally-designed quality housing is best. As for taste, too many citizens believe that high artistic forms are something to be seen in the past, in a museum, gallery, or only by the elite. Let's be clear, money is not synonymous with taste nor quality. The fact is, however, the simplest ingredients more often create the most delicious dish. An adept cook can prepare delicious and nourishing cuisine that is, in fact, cheaper and better than mass-produced processed food. This realization is currently changing food culture in the United States. I want to see the same challenging awareness at work in the housing industry. In the case of architectural design, those ingredients consist of proportion, scale, geometry, composition and materials. In an essay from 1882, *Some Relations of Art to the American People*, the author writes, "The Greeks, whose deities were men gifted with ideal attributes, appealed in their works to the sense of beauty, and especially to the delight in perfect form and proportion."³² The "Citizens United" ruling makes it easier for corporations and moneyed inter-

³² Martin Brimmer, "Some Relations of Art to the American People," *Journal of Social Science, Containing the Proceedings of the American Association*, (1882).

ests to buy elections, usurping the power of the people. Corporate tract house developments sneakily steal precious individuality away from its residents, thus weakening the civic body and increasing their power as government puppeteers. This can be interpreted as an extreme modern rendition of the moneyed Hamiltonian powers that Jefferson devoted his civic-soul to defeating. In a TED Talk presentation, *The Ghastly Tragedy of the Suburbs*, author James H. Kunstler communicated a vital lesson for the survival of architectural culture, our buildings, he said, need to “afford us a glimpse to where we’re going in order to allow us to dwell in a hopeful present. If there is one great catastrophe about the places we’ve built, the human environments we’ve made for ourselves in the last fifty years, it has deprived us of the ability to live in a hopeful present.” Kunstler references “McHouses” since not all are mansions, describing their stylistic-mimickery as “cartoon conventions of something that existed earlier.”³³ An 1841 article, *On the Alleged Degeneracy of Modern Architecture*, offers an enlightened critique of the emergence of gothic revival architecture in contract to a “virtuous architecture”:

The art they (architects) practice is in a high degree refining and ennobling in its influences on the public mind; their interest, because architects cannot live unless the value of the art is recognizable, understood, and properly appreciated. People understand, well enough, that they should be careful in choosing those who are to represent them in legislative assemblies; but how lamentably do they neglect that art, whose products represent them, not only to the present age, and in the eyes of contemporaries, but which are to declare to future generations “what manner of men they were.”³⁴

³³ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Ghastly Tragedy of the Suburbs*. http://www.ted.com/talks/james_howard_kunstler_dissects_suburbia#t-11341

³⁴ Cary Long. “Architecture: On the Alleged Degeneracy of Modern Architecture,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, (1841): 2, 4.

The primary distinction between architecture and “mere building” was first articulated in the 19th century, encompassed in Nikolaus Pevsner’s comparison between a bicycle shed, “a building” and Lincoln Cathedral, a “piece of architecture.” A degree of so called self-conscious sophistication, subtlety and depth are naturally expected from professional architect-designed buildings, as opposed to other kinds usually defined by what they are not. In an article entitled “Architecture in Everyday Life,” author Dell Upton writes, “professionally designed structures constitute *extraordinary* landmarks in a vast expanse of the ordinary.” This is an astute observation as many observers can spot a fine building standing out amongst a sea of bland templates. In 1964, the Museum of Modern Art mounted Bernard Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects*. This exhibition presented a diverse range of photographs of “non-pedigreed” architecture as evidence of intuitive genius builders who aimed only to accommodate the values of everyday lives of their “primitive” or “traditional” communities. This was a valid exhibition drawing on human necessity and the “culture of everyday living.” It was not meant to negate meaningful design, but to promote design as a sort of folk, grass-roots tradition. A few years later architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown held the architectural community up to a new standard. Ironically this standard would lower the bar, discounting the value that aesthetics actually do play in the average person’s life. They introduced the very factor that devolved to infect mainstream residential architecture today, the mass-produced architecture of virtueless standardization America, dubbed “pop” for short. This is the very kind of building found in strip malls and mass-built suburbs. Venturi and Brown argued that architects working in a commercial society needed to be grounded in the “reality” of lower-middle-class aesthetic values. Critics called their argument the triumph of theory over taste. They made an intellectual case that might look good on

paper, but which looks ugly across the built environment. All humans experience a response to environment and its aesthetic stimuli whether they realize it or not. Likely, the outcome of “pop” architecture has either misrepresented those aesthetic values or misunderstood them as synonymous with emptiness. Venturi and Brown did succeed in achieving a syncopation between monotonous, repetitive buildings and drone mass production/consumption.³⁵ Theirs was a revolt against elitism, but instead of democratizing architecture and society, they cheapened both. Their misunderstanding was that democracy – as Jefferson understood – is actually an exquisite balance, not a default to the lowest common denominator. This is a common misconception by tyrants and theorists who are anti-democratic. This new cookie-cutter “Pop” architecture prompted the brilliant song, “Little Boxes,” by Malvina Reynolds in 1962. “Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky, little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same.”³⁶ Pete Seeger’s cover of this song helped to make it more famous.

In an article on consumerist architecture, John Chase defines consumerism as the “synergetic interaction of mass production and consumption” and that its basic characteristic is the “use of advertising and product design to stimulate the public’s demand for goods and services.” Consumerist architecture differs from vernacular architecture in its rootedness in marketing techniques and conscious goal of prompting consumption. Vernacular architecture is an outgrowth of an established body of building practice and associated cultural lore interpreted by individuals, usually for personal use. Corporate consumerist architecture has taken the place of authentic

³⁵ Dell Upton, “Architecture in Everyday Life,” *New Literary History*, 33, no. 4, (2002): 707-723.

³⁶ “Malvina Reynolds: Song Lyrics and Poems.” (2014), <http://people.wku.edu/charles.smith/MALVINA/mr094.htm>. 12/03/2014

vernacular architecture and has sadly become the new vernacular in building present day America. It is the commercial vernacular. Chase writes:

The commercial vernacular usually pretends to be almost anything other than what it actually is: Spanish tile, Tudor half-timbering, and colonial American fan-lights are guises slipped onto structures like Halloween costumes.

Tract houses are simply another example of the hijacking of individual democratic power. It goes largely unnoticed by middle-class consumer/victims and is often the only option available to middle-class families. The consumer style is meant to describe commercial architecture, I argue, however, that it is essential to understand that these principles are also the driving force behind houses in which the home itself is the consumer product- the tract house. Consumer architecture functions like marketing. The labeling (whichever *faux* style) of a house is usually more important than the actual character of its design. Chase uses the food metaphor, stating that with the introduction of canned and frozen foods, and unseasonal agro-business produce, consumers began buying national-commercial products rather than local produce.³⁷ Eating is a human necessity, yet the act of eating alone does not constitute dining. For eons, our ancestors ate to survive, just as they lived in whatever shelter they could obtain. Today – thanks in large part to the mass-production revolution I bemoan – calories and shelter are widely available. What we must do is up the ante in terms of our demands. We deserve and can obtain better – and often simpler, more natural – food. We deserve and can obtain better – often simpler, more natural – houses.³⁸ Thomas Jefferson was known for his gracious dinner parties and having introduced fine French

³⁷ John Chase, “The Role of Consumerism in American Architecture,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 44, no. 4 (1991): 211-224.

³⁸ Michael Wallach, “Art, Science, and Representation: Toward an Experimental Psychology of Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 18, no. 2 (1959): 159-173.

wine and cuisine to the fledgling United States. In recent years, America has seen the emergence of a new buy-local and farm-to-table movement. From Alice Waters' *Chez Panisse* to the local farmer's market, a food-values revival of the sort I wish to see in housing is going on around us. With the successful spread of this highly republican movement the possibility of a "build-local" movement does not seem so far-fetched. In our society, Chase posits, perhaps the most architects can do is attempt to harness the commonly shared interest in consumption in the service of public places that relate consumption back to a greater public and civic identity. Since a republic can only function when virtuous individuals unite to form a polis, this architectural theory must be applied to private homes using the yin-yang model: a balance of individual preferences and desires with a greater civic virtue.

The psychology of place describes the processing of spacial perception, territorial behavior, density, and the formation of mental maps. All of these elements influence our connection to place and our behavior in that place. Homes are obviously no exception. "It's about the interrelationship between us and the environment- built spaces, or nature" according to Paul Harris, a professor of psychology who has taught a course on the subject since 2000. "It is by nature a very multidisciplinary field" that draws upon geography, political science, sociology, physiology, architecture, ecology and psychology. In other words it fits beautifully under the umbrella of American Studies and is a key source of evidence in defense of this thesis. Without social harmony built upon environment there can be no political harmony and thus no national cohesion. Or, less conclusively, social harmony can be improved by the built environment so that there might be better political harmony and national cohesion. The impact of nature on one's stress level is no epiphany. A New Yorker, for example, may notice a significant lightening of mood

during a visit to the country or even an afternoon spent in Central Park, while a rural dweller's tension might spike during a weekend visit to Manhattan. City or countryside; a matter of individual taste, but either reveals the effect place has on mental and emotional state. Studies show that natural settings do indeed create a biological response. Evolutionary psychologists would not be surprised, because they consider that our species evolved to have certain reactions to our surroundings. In fact, once upon a time, our survival depended upon it. So today, we are still as tuned in to what is around us, but the structures in our built environment are made without consideration for such needs. Did Venturi and Brown consider how their embrace of the tacky would preclude citizens from seeing and being uplifted by their surroundings, as all people are? If they did, they did not give it enough importance. One study assigned patients to random hospital rooms, some overlooking buildings and others trees. The patients exposed to the natural views healed faster and exhibited less stress. Perhaps we can draw a correlation between the stress levels of Americans who reside in subdivisions that are purposefully devoid of natural landscapes. Harris says, "We seem to be hardwired to respond to certain aspects of nature with relaxation." The rest of the study is open to interpretation, cautioning that just because a space is designed with these scientific principles in place does not mean the public will respond to it or use it the way it is intended. Just like some planners untrained in environmental psychology get it right. Professor Harris names this the difference between architectural determinism and architectural probabilism.³⁹

³⁹ Michael Wallach, "Art, Science, and Representation: Toward an Experimental Psychology of Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 18, no. 2 (1959): 159-173.

CHAPTER V: A Villa of Secular Spirituality

Monticello. Monticello is to Thomas Jefferson as the Mona Lisa is to Leonardo Da Vinci. This is an appropriate analogy as the renaissance Jefferson, like the Renaissance Da Vinci before him, was a master at integrating the arts and sciences. Of lesser fame is Jefferson's Poplar Forest, his retreat 90 miles south of Monticello, arguably the man's true masterpiece. Monticello was a constant construction site with continuous improvements being undertaken. Its final columns were not erected until a few years before its designer's death. Additionally, the mansion had, for all intents and purposes, become a hotel for the non-stop barrage of visitors that made a pilgrimage to the sage/author of the Declaration of Independence. Merrill Peterson described Monticello as a "country philosophical hall." Others have rightly pointed out that that country may as well have been the United States. Needless to say the chaos of Monticello fueled the need for a getaway, Poplar Forest. Jefferson inherited the property, named for its tall poplars, from his father-in-law. Design for the house began in 1806 during his second term as president and was sufficiently constructed for use in 1809 and then primarily completed by 1820. With the exception of two small stairwell extensions, Poplar Forest is as its creator described it, "an octagon of 50 ft. diameter, of brick, well built."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Jill Enfield and Wayne Fields, "Jefferson's Second Home," *American Heritage*, 44, no. 2 (2014): 104.



North facade



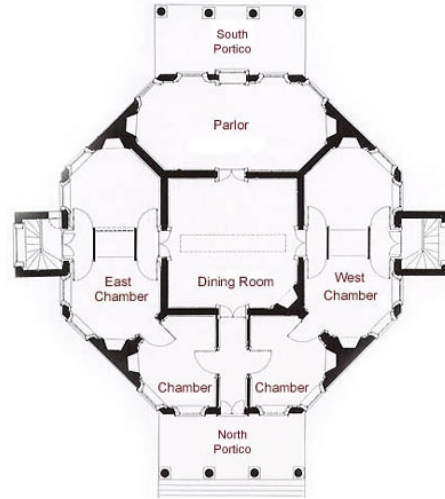
South facade

In an age where ignorance is the easiest path to bliss and many give up newspapers in exchange for “*The Real Housewives*” (or any other mindless franchise: pick your poison), it may be especially difficult to relate to a letter from Jefferson to John Adams in 1812, writing: “I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier.” By Jefferson’s time, Euclid, the ancient Greek founder of geometry,

had become a testament to the power of human reason to deduce truth. Euclidean geometry, “deduced an elaborate system of propositions that seemed both to accurately describe physical reality and to compose a flawlessly logical system.”⁴¹ In this manner Euclid was able to inspire readers to apply reason to fields beyond geometry such as philosophy, economics, political theory, religion, and art. By doing so one could arrive at truths as valid as mathematical truth. This monumental contribution allowed Euclid to live beyond the scientific revolution of the 17th C, becoming central to Newtonian science and a “general presence” in the Enlightenment. This provides the direct link to Jeffersonian philosophy and its physical manifestations like Poplar Forest. Jefferson’s education at William and Mary by William Small relied heavily on John Locke and the idea of self-evident truths as the key to a mathematical mode of thinking that provided the foundation of all knowledge. During his leisurely years of retirement, Jefferson reflected in easy terms on the delight he took in Euclidean mathematics, “We have no theories here, no uncertainties remain on the mind, but all is demonstration and satisfaction.” Could any sentiment be more appropriate for a man who spent periods of his retirement in an enlightened geometric home? During the planning for his University of Virginia, he endorsed his friend Thomas Cooper’s proposal to exclude prospective students who could not “demonstrate a thorough knowledge of Euclid.”⁴²

⁴¹ McCoy, Drew R. McCoy, “An “Old Fashioned” Nationalism: Lincoln, Jefferson and the Classical Tradition,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 23, no 1 (2002): 55-67.

⁴² McCoy, Drew R. McCoy, “An “Old Fashioned” Nationalism: Lincoln, Jefferson and the Classical Tradition,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 23, no 1 (2002): 55-67.



People have long been drawn to geometric shapes. Aesthetic schemes from Islamic design to Scandinavian Modern use geometry for purposes of attractiveness. The human penchant for geometry can be traced back to the origins of art itself. Patterns of dots, lines, cross-hatchings, zig-zags and swirls far outnumber the drawings of animals found on Paleolithic cave art at Lascaux, France. It is believed that these geometric patterns came about from the early practice of shamanism and altered states of consciousness. It is possible that geometric hallucinations, whether induced by drugs, neurological conditions (such as migraines or epilepsy), sensory deprivation, shamanistic techniques, or *Fantasia*, could explain our universal fascination for these shapes and patterns. In his book, *Hallucinations*, psychiatrist Oliver Sacks suggested that, “Perhaps such experiences are at the root of the human obsession with pattern and the fact that geometrical patterns find their way into our decorative arts.” A possible explanation for how such hallucinations could be produced is that geometric hallucinations are projections of the geometric structure of the brain, thus geometry is built into the architecture of our visual cortex, as a result,

if the brain is damaged in some way then we can visually experience this fact for ourselves.⁴³

Alexander V. Voloshinov, in an essay on *Symmetry as a Superprinciple of Science and Art*, observes: “The geometrical proportionality of parts of a whole is known as harmony. Heraclitus declared geometric proportion a principle of harmony: “Out of everything- a unified whole, out of a unified whole- everything.””⁴⁴ This strikingly reflects the original motto for the American republic, “*E Pluribus Unum*,” out of many-one.

Especially today, being used to square boxes and right-angled living, Poplar Forest’s slopes and turns are seductively fascinating. In an essay on the home, authors Wayne Fields and Jill Enfield capture a piece of the home’s essence writing that the windows “look out in every direction, as though when visitors break through the secrecy of the narrow winding drive and peer through the surrounding trees, it is they that are the observed and the house that does the observing.”⁴⁵

A 1946 essay on octagonal forms in southern architecture reveals that despite their apparent oddity, octagonal buildings have existed in varying geographical regions during every era of human history. This, however does not make them common. They have gotten lost in the sea of squares. Poplar Forest is America’s first octagonal house. Jefferson had a particular affinity for breaking away from the standard Georgian box-style which he so disliked. In the early 1770s he made tracings of two octagonal garden temples from Plates 67 and 69 of *Gibbs’ Architecture*

⁴³ Woolfe, Sam. “An Explanation for Our Aesthetic Appreciation of Geometry.” *Sam Woolfe: Politics, Opinion, Psychoedlic Art and a Collection of Interesting Ideas*. November 24, 2014

⁴⁴ Alexander V. Voloshinov, “Symmetry as a Superprinciple of Art and Science,” *Leonardo*, 29, no. 2 (1996): 109-113.

⁴⁵ Jill Enfield and Wayne Fields, “Jefferson’s Second Home,” *American Heritage*, 44, no. 2 (2014): 104.

purportedly to adorn the grounds of Monticello. The cruciform plan of the first Monticello (1771) had three arms ending in bays and the fourth, the portico. When the house's depth was doubled after 1796 two more octagons were added. Among his sketches, over 50 plans contain some octagonal feature and thirty of these have one or more perfectly formed eight-sided rooms or pavilions.⁴⁶ An early rendering for Monticello included one room octagonal pavilions as part of the grand scheme. In the same unbuilt concept were plans for an octagonal chapel, and an octagonal structure to be built of logs.⁴⁷

During his five-year tenure in France Jefferson observed that "All of the new and good houses" in Paris were of a single story. He cleverly built Poplar Forest into the crown of a hill so that the two-story house would appear to be a single story from the front.⁴⁸ The interior of the single story house is divided into six rooms: three elongated octagons, two half octagons and in the center, the dining room, a perfect cube, 20' x 20' x 20', flooded with light from a skylight. The dining room is a soaring two-story room in what appears to be a one story house. Two of the octagons were bedrooms, each divided in half by Jefferson's preferred alcove beds. Privacy for the beds was given by moveable screens or curtains, so a single room could essentially become two, each with its own fireplace.⁴⁹ Poplar Forest is a melodic fusion of Renaissance Palladian, 18th century French architecture, as well as British and Virginia design representing the best of

⁴⁶ Clay, Lancaster, "Some Octagonal Forms in Southern Architecture," *The Art Bulletin*, 28, no. 2 (1944): 103-111.

⁴⁷ Allen S. Chambers Jr., "Poplar Forest and Thomas Jefferson," *The Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest*. (1993).

⁴⁸ Poplar Forest Used Passive Principles in 1806. Solaripedia. http://www.solaripedia.com/13/397/5824/poplar_forest_floor_plan.html. 03/01/2015

⁴⁹ Clay Lancaster, "Some Octagonal Forms in Southern Architecture," *The Art Bulletin*, 28, no. 2 (1944): 103-111.

Jefferson's architectural talent. In accordance with classical architecture a building's proportions or room's "order" determine the appearance of its columns, capitals, entablature and decorative details. Jefferson incorporated three of the five orders at Poplar Forest. The Tuscan order was used on the exterior, plain columns and capitals, the simplicity of which conveys naturalness and integrity. The more ornate Doric order was used for the dining room entablatures, and the further elegant Ionic entablature in the parlor replicated those of the Roman temple of Fortuna Virilis. The frieze was composed of small cherubs alternating with ox skulls, connected by swags of foliage.⁵⁰ The simplicity of the home's plan demonstrates Jefferson's attraction to the precision of mathematics and for a house with such formal divisions, the arrangement was rather flexible and original and direct in its function foreshadowing house planning for the 20th and 21st centuries.

Natural light was of great importance to Jefferson and except for one half-moon window in the front pediment, all windows were rectangular, ranging from double to triple hung. The quality of light he expected depended upon a larger than usual glass size and in 1807 he wrote James Donath in Philadelphia to order 12"x18" oversized glass. The large panes catch the light from various angles, reflecting it through the space opening up the tightly contained mathematical structure.⁵¹ From a 21st century standpoint Poplar Forest utilizes efficient "green" design. The home's 12" thick exterior brick walls provide a mitigating thermal barrier to the hot summer in Virginia's piedmont region. Windows on multiple sides of exterior walls capture air, facilitating cross ventilation. The dining room skylight transverses the ceiling along an east/west

⁵⁰ "Poplar Forest Used Passive Principles in 1806." *Solaripedia*. (March 2015). http://www.solaripedia.com/13/397/5824/poplar_forest_floor_plan.html.

⁵¹ Enfield, Jill and Fields, Wayne. "Jefferson's Second Home." *American Heritage*. Apr93, Vol. 44 Issue 2, p104. 9/22/14

axis allowing daylight to shine in without bringing heat, creating a cool but light cube.⁵² Taking additional cues from the French, Jefferson used soil from the foundation excavations to build mounds on the east and west ends of the house planted with trees acting as pavilions, connecting to the house by wings of mulberry tree alleys. This plan artistically expressed Andrea Palladio's five-part architectural plan with Jefferson substituting landscape elements for the brick-and-mortar of Palladio.⁵³ Whereas authentic architecture effortlessly fuses with the natural environment, corporate developments are purposefully devoid of any hint of natural landscape.



⁵² "Poplar Forest Used Passive Principles in 1806." *Solaripedia*. (March 2015). http://www.solaripedia.com/13/397/5824/poplar_forest_floor_plan.html.

⁵³ "Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest." *Jefferson's Landscape*. (March 2015). www.poplarforest.org/the-retreat/landscape-restoration/jefferons-landscape/.

Unlike the public house of Monticello, Poplar Forest was Jefferson's wholly personal endeavor where he could indulge in whimsy without concern for his fellow citizens. Where Monticello represented Thomas Jefferson's dreams of an intellectual nation of equality, Poplar Forest was the culmination of his own individual liberty and thus together the two homes form that American *yin-yang*. It was a modest home in decoration and virtue.

A correspondence between Jefferson and sculptor William Coffee illuminate the personal creative freedom that Jefferson took in the design of Poplar Forest. Coffee was hired to construct a combination of figures, ox skulls and human busts, that would decorate the dining room Doric entablatures. Coffee respectfully wrote to Jefferson believing there was a misunderstanding since antiquity provided no precedent for such a mixture of figures. Jefferson kindly responded that Coffee was correct in regard to classical examples, "But in my middle room at Poplar Forest I mean to mix the faces and ox-skulls, a fancy I can indulge in my own case, although in a public work I feel bound to follow authority strictly." At The University of Virginia "authority" was strictly followed, certain liberties could not be taken at Monticello, but Poplar Forest was completely his own. Whatever Jefferson borrowed he gave it its own American touch. "Always the trick was to bend bricks and boards and tin to his will, to make the material yield to his ideas."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Jill Enfield and Wayne Fields, "Jefferson's Second Home," *American Heritage*, 44, no. 2 (2014): 104.



Rendering of personalized Doric entablature in dining room by William Coffee (and skylight)



Cube dining room with skylight

As a southern planter born into a culture of slavery, Jefferson's obsession for creating order and reason may have stemmed from internal conflict mirroring cultural chaos in light of the most evident American paradox, that between slavery and freedom. Additionally, his wealth was tied up in property, land and slaves. He continually lived well beyond his means of salary and farm income, ironically remaining indebted to British creditors, whom he despised, until his death. Thomas Jefferson could not live without wine, books, scientific instruments and fine furnishings. He is like many Americans today who are deeply in debt while in pursuit of their dreams. In a society built on capital and material, necessity and debt are often entwined.

From studying the man's writings and works the assertion can reasonably be made (although he would never have chosen these words) that Jefferson found spirituality in architecture. If the soul was corpuscular, as he believed, than architecture was his soul. This was his true

therapeutic reprieve from his chaotic world and compartmentalized mind, as described by Joseph Ellis. The creation of architecture was the only way he could tangibly impose harmony in his world and the world at large. A characterization of the classic villa, especially as conceived by Jefferson from its Roman prototypes, was its power and ability to be “impervious to reality.” Jefferson’s beautifully naive reality “bubble” was rooted in dreamy optimism for the future and for humanity. It is what makes the man both simultaneously lovable and insufferable, and a challenging force to tackle. Poplar Forest was a physical place where Jefferson’s “optimism could renew itself.”⁵⁵ It is suspected that Jefferson’s octagon was meant to give clarity of thought, stripping away distractions that might deflect intellectual and aesthetic attention.⁵⁶ Visitors of Poplar Forest today will likely experience the same sense of secular aesthetic spirituality as Jefferson, formed by a sublime melding of symmetry, light and geometric perfection.

⁵⁵ Travis C. McDonald Jr., “Constructing Optimism: Thomas Jefferson’s Poplar Forest Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture,” *People, Power, Places*, 8 (2000): 176-200.

⁵⁶ Jill Enfield and Wayne Fields, “Jefferson’s Second Home,” *American Heritage*, 44, no. 2 (2014): 104.



South facing sunlit parlor



CONCLUSION

What does all of this mean in 21st century America? I am surely not suggesting that we must all reside in classical villas. Nor do I propose to start a company selling Poplar Forest knock-offs in a Jeffersonian-themed subdivision. Rather than a house's specific style, it is the aesthetic and virtuous principles that matter most. These principles need not add significant cost to a home. If a classically American style is sought by a consumer, a modern, architect-designed Colonial Revival might be ideal. However, for the average middle-class American, efficient, "green" prefab architecture may be the most accessible way to go. Again paralleling the present, the 1841 article on the *Degeneracy of Modern Architecture* suggests:

Must man progress in goodness and in wisdom? Then must architecture also! Is man so progressing? Then is architecture also, though we may not know it nor see it. Architecture must manifest the changes that are taking place in society, the greater ones, we hope and believe, that are yet to come.⁵⁷

The term 'prefab' may throw readers at first, perhaps sounding too similar to cookie-cutter, but do not confuse them, the difference is not slight. Prefab is a smart, economical and highly customizable building solution. Unlike cookie-cutter, prefab is not a one-size-fits-all model, but offers almost limitless options tailored to each individual. The flexibility of design comes from the process of working with modular forms. These forms, already manufactured, or custom-manufactured, can be mixed and matched. The efficiency and affordability of prefab homes is achieved by having the units manufactured almost, or entirely in a warehouse then transported directly to the house's foundation. "It's grown up Legos" said home owner Kaja Taft deserving her prefab house in Portland, Oregon. "There was nothing here. Eight hours later, there was a

⁵⁷ Cary Long. "Architecture: On the Alleged Degeneracy of Modern Architecture," *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, (1841): 2, 4.

house made of triangles.”⁵⁸ The house came to fruition utilizing a system called HOMB, derived from “honeycomb,” created by architect Jeff Kovel, which uses any number of 100-square-foot triangular structures that can be arranged and stacked together to create a small or large construction. The house is reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1936 Hanna House at Stanford University. Both architects, like Jefferson before them, wanted to break away from the standard box shape. Wright did this using a hexagon, and Kovel a triangle. “Your eye goes farther than the room” said Kovel. Much like Poplar Forest, “the angles expand the space in a way that feels natural.” Kovel believes that houses custom made to respond to their natural environments, connecting to the outdoors, should not be a luxury, but something everyone should be able to afford and experience.⁵⁹ Prefab is authentic and despite the typically ultra-modern look there is no reason why prefab design and its construction methods cannot be used to create a more classical aesthetic to achieve a sort of modern-Colonial Revival. That is the democratic beauty of prefab design.

Toward the end of Thomas Jefferson’s life and through the embittered North/South divide, he would be associated by southerners anxious to lend credibility to their cause with states’ rights and the secessionist cause. It was Abraham Lincoln who did much to rescue Jefferson from the clutches of the antebellum slave-holding south. Lincoln wrote in 1859:

All honor to Jefferson: to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it

⁵⁸ Amanda Dameron. “Dwell,” *The New Prefab*, (2015) <http://www.dwell.com/magazine/new-prefab>

⁵⁹ Amanda Dameron. “Dwell,” *The New Prefab*, (2015) <http://www.dwell.com/magazine/new-prefab>

there, that today, and in the coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression.⁶⁰

In 1863, President Lincoln's brief, yet eternal Gettysburg Address again evoked Jefferson: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Lincoln focused on the moral grounding of the Declaration, not the legal framework of the Constitution, moving the center of Jefferson's influence to more hallowed ground.⁶¹ In 1998, Jefferson's reputation took a blow, with the publication of *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings: An American Controversy* by Annette Gordon-Reed. Gordon-Reed's groundbreaking work revealed the evidence in support of Jefferson's decades-long affair with slave Sally Hemmings, who likely bore him children. This is not to be ignored, but neither can Mr. Jefferson be defined only through slavery and Sally.

Although Thomas Jefferson's full exposure to art and architecture began in Europe, it is of great importance that his interest in them began early in his life. Fiske Kimball, the first expert on Jeffersonian architecture, and first professor of architecture at the University of Virginia, notes that Jefferson's youthful interest is particularly remarkable for the time since artistic opportunities and stimuli were rare in the American colonies.⁶² Today we see a reluctance to embrace

⁶⁰ Christopher Hitchens, "Thomas Jefferson: Author of America," (United States: Harper Collins, 2005). Available online at <http://www.harpercollins.com>

⁶¹ Christopher Hitchens, "Thomas Jefferson: Author of America," (United States: Harper Collins, 2005). Available online at <http://www.harpercollins.com>

⁶² Fiske Kimball, "Jefferson and the Arts," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 87, no. 3 (1943): 238-245.

humanistic visions, perhaps related to the national mania for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). For the sake of democratic survival American grade school education must re-embrace the humanities so young Americans can grow up to be engaged citizens in a revived republic. If we as a society apply Jeffersonian principles to our lives, even in some small way, and return home building to the hands of skilled architects, away from inauthentic developers, America can begin to recapture an aesthetic tradition that may help lead us to a renewal of virtue and participation in our frail modern democracy. In the end, I argue that the built environment – especially the homes in which we live – affect our outlook and our ability to engage with this republic. I advocate Jefferson’s architectural vision as a solution which could help to popularize a higher standard of home-building that seeks to support democracy.

