

# Origins and Development of the American Campus: The “Academical Village” of Thomas Jefferson



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**Abstract** The study intends to analyze the many influences that led Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, to conceive and realize a very innovative project for universities in America. The research, started many years ago and still ongoing, is based on the very large amount of original documents and on the ever-growing bibliography. It was carried out partly in the USA, thanks to funding from the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Through this, relationships were established with other institutions, such as the New York University Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò and the School of Architecture of the University of Virginia.

**Keywords** North America · Campus · Models · Antiquity · Academical village

The University of Virginia is the most celebrated project among the numerous ones that Thomas Jefferson developed during his long and intense life (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The following are the main stages of the intense life of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). After completing his studies in Law, he entered politics in 1768, with the election to the Virginia Assembly. In 1774, he wrote “A Summary View of the Rights of British America”, a document which was a prelude to the Declaration of Independence. In 1775, he was elected to the Continental Congress of Philadelphia, in 1779 he was governor of Virginia, and between 1784 and 1789 he was in Paris, acting as Minister of the United States in France. In 1790, he was appointed Secretary of State by George Washington. Defeated by Adams in the 1796 presidential election, he was named vice president. In 1801, he was elected as the third President of the United States, a post he held in a second term, from 1808. In 1803, he redeemed Louisiana from France. Among the proposed laws are the “Bill for religious freedom”, approved by the Virginia assembly in 1786; the ban on importing slaves from Africa, promoted in 1808.

Main source for each study on Thomas Jefferson are the collections of his writings and documents: *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by A. A. LIPSCOMB, A. E. BERGH, Washington 1905; *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by P. L. FORD, New York 1905, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by J. P. BOYD, 35 vols., Princeton since 1950. Many of these collections,

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S. Della Torre et al. (eds.), *Buildings for Education*, Research for Development,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33687-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33687-5_8)



**Fig. 1** Charlottesville, University of Virginia, bird-eye view

It is a complex project, which had a long gestation and saw the collaboration of several figures. It can be considered the quintessence of his ideals, and one of his most important and significant works, as the words inscribed on his tomb recall:

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the law for religious freedom in Virginia, and father of the University of Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

The project for the Charlottesville campus was developed in approximately two decades and can be regarded as Jefferson's last great work. He devoted much time to architecture, both in the private and public sphere, as shown by the extensive and documented catalog of his projects (some of which were executed, while others remained on paper). From his residence in Monticello to the competition for the President's House, from the Capitol of Richmond to the Capital on the Potomac and the University of Charlottesville,<sup>3</sup> Jefferson tends to all aspects, from the furnishings to the entire plan of the city and the territory.

The University of Virginia is not just an architectural work. It is the concretization of a larger project on education, and its design is emblematic of his multiple interests and of Jefferson's deep commitment to educating the young nation.

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together with extensive and up-to-date bibliographies, are now available online. See *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress; *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, an Electronic Archive, a selection of the most important documents kept at the Massachusetts Historical Society of Boston. See <https://www.monticello.org>, website of the Robert J. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies; <https://founders.archives.gov>, website of the National Archives. The original documents are preserved mainly at the Coolidge Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Boston; the Special Collection Department section, University of Virginia Library; the Rare Book and Special Collection Division and the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, with about 27,000 documents.

<sup>2</sup>See full transcription in <https://founders.archives.gov>.

<sup>3</sup>On Jefferson as an architect after the fundamental works by Fiske Kimball many studies have followed. For the main bibliographical references, see <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/tje/architecture>; [https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Jefferson\\_Thomas\\_and\\_Architecture](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Jefferson_Thomas_and_Architecture).

In 1778, he presented “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” to the House of Delegates:

... And whereas it is generally true that people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those person, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance ....<sup>4</sup>

The proposal was not approved. It was submitted another time in 1780 and again by James Madison when Jefferson was in France, and it was finally approved in an amended version as “Act to Establish Public Schools” in 1796.<sup>5</sup>

The intent to provide culture and education for all is based on the same Enlightenment ideals that inspired the Declaration of Independence, which recognizes the inalienable right to happiness, achievable only by a population free from tyranny. Education is the essential foundation of this principle, and the University of Virginia represents the culmination of such great a project.<sup>6</sup>

This confluence of thoughts and ideals emphasizes how it is impossible to think of Jefferson’s individual architectural project as unrelated to his work as a politician and a man of the law.

Along with the ideal of the spreading culture came a concrete plan, too. In the projects dedicated to the organization of the West territories—the Land Ordinance of 1784 and its revision of 1785—Jefferson designed buildings dedicated to public instruction for each “township”.<sup>7</sup>

The University of Virginia satisfies both symbolic representative and practical needs. It celebrates and makes use of universal ancient models, while also keeping the local tradition alive, especially in terms of the materials used and the scale of the buildings.

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<sup>4</sup>See <https://www.monticello.org>. On this particular aspect of Jefferson’s activity, see also “A Bill for Establishing a Public Library”, 18 June 1779, in <https://founders.archives.gov>.

<sup>5</sup>The proposal was again re-elaborated in the second decade of the nineteenth century. See “Thomas Jefferson’s Draft Bill to Create Central College and Amend the 1796 Public Schools Act”, ca. 18 November 1814, in <https://founders.archives.gov>.

<sup>6</sup>Jefferson also provided, with an important acquisition campaign, collection of books for the Library. On the subject see Loi, M. C., *La biblioteca di Thomas Jefferson*, in *I Libri e l’Ingegno*, ed. by Curcio, G., Nobile, M. R., Scotti Tosini, A., Caracol, Palermo 2010, pp. 203–210, with a detailed bibliography.

<sup>7</sup>The projects for the organization of the territory established the creation of township, settlement of 6 miles per side. Cfr. Maumi, C., *La griglia del National Survey e la democrazia Americana*, in *Jefferson e Palladio, Come costruire un mondo nuovo*, ed. by Beltramini, G., Lenzo, F., Officina Libraria, Milano 2015, pp. 95–105, and the bibliography there indicated.

# 1 State-of-the-Art

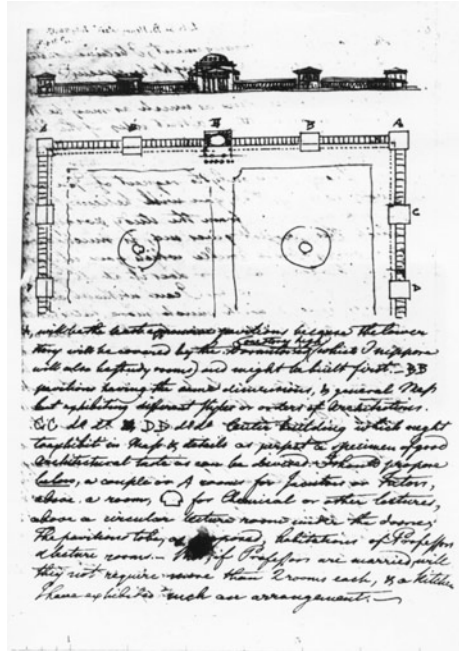
The project is known and very well documented. Countless studies have been dedicated to it by American and international scholars and more research are in progress.<sup>8</sup> The large amount of documentation made it possible to trace the history of the university. Today, these documents have been in large part transferred in electronic format: original documents, writings, letters, projects, and, of course, a large number of drawings have been allowed to trace and deepen the understanding of the history of the University and the creative process that brought it to completion (Figs. 2 and 3). It should be emphasized, however, that the general guiding principles of the project—the formal organization of the campus, the language adopted, the distribution of the functions—have always been well recognizable since the very beginning of these studies. They emerged clearly already in the pioneering studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and have remained substantially unchanged.

**Fig. 2** Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Thornton, May 9, 1817. N300. MSS 171, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (Courtesy of the University of Virginia Library)



<sup>8</sup>One of the most recent publications, Wilson, R. G., *Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village: The Creation of an Architectural Masterpiece*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville 2009 (revised edition), offers essential materials for the study of the project. Furthermore, the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies, provides a continuously updated and detailed bibliography and reports on all aspects of Thomas Jefferson's studies, in which the history of the University of Virginia plays an important role. For the drawings related to the project see <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/wilson/drawings>.

**Fig. 3** Letter from Benjamin Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson, July 24, 1817. N304, K213. Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson Manuscripts. Massachusetts Historical Society (Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society)



## 2 The “Academical Village”

As is well known, the core principle guiding the realization of the university is the “academical village”. This idea constitutes the springboard for the entire project. Jefferson himself explained it in a famous letter to Littleton Waller Tazewell, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates who had manifested his approval for Jefferson’s ideas regarding the new university:

Large houses are always ugly, inconvenient, exposed to the accident of fire, and bad cases of infection. A plain small house for the school and lodging of each professor is best... In fact, a University should not be a house but a village.<sup>9</sup>

The same letter already states all the guiding principles of Jefferson’s project, from the financial and administrative aspects to the study programs and the architectural project. The idea of the academic village had already been formulated in the “Rockfish Gap Report” of 1818:

... They [commissioners] are of opinion that it should consist of distinct houses or pavilions, arranged at proper distances on each side of a lawn of a proper breadth, and of indefinite extent, in one direction, at least; in each of which should be a lecturing room, with two to four apartments, for the accommodation of a professor and his family; that these pavilions should be united by a range of dormitories, sufficient each for the accommodation of two students

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Jefferson to Littleton Waller Tazewell, January 5, 1805, in Peterson, M.D., *Jefferson Writings*, 1152.

only, this provision being deemed advantageous to morals, to order, and to uninterrupted study; and that a passage of some kind, under cover from the weather, should give a communication along the whole range ... It is supposed probable, that a building of somewhat more size in the middle of the grounds may be called for in time, in which may be rooms for religious worship, under such impartial regulations as the Visitors shall prescribe, for public examinations, for a library, for the schools of music, drawing, and other associated purposes.<sup>10</sup>

Pavilions for classes and professors' residencies, dormitories for the students, all surrounding the lawn, and a larger building to host the library and other public purposes: this text de facto describes all the core elements which would then appear in the final project.

What are the implications of this innovative concept, unprecedented in schools both in the colonies and in England, and destined to become the model of a new architectural typology for universities?

The campus designed by Thomas Jefferson symbolizes a series of strong, innovative and "revolutionary" ideas in both education and architecture.

It symbolizes an important and innovative pedagogical principle: to establish a new relationship between student and teacher, based on mutual respect, a relationship *inter pares* to be experienced in a space both solemn and human-sized. The focus of this ideal space is the lawn. The role Jefferson gives to this space, at the center of the entire complex, is unequivocally connected to the ideal of a rural, uncontaminated America. This principle was present in all Jefferson's projects. In the *Notes on the State of Virginia* he wrote:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson developed a utopian, anti-urban idea for the young rural nation based on physiocratic principles. His vision was pro-agrarian and anti-urban. He intended to contain the inevitable acceleration of American financial and industrial capitalism, and exemplified these ideas in his project for the new capital.<sup>12</sup> Jefferson's naturalistic

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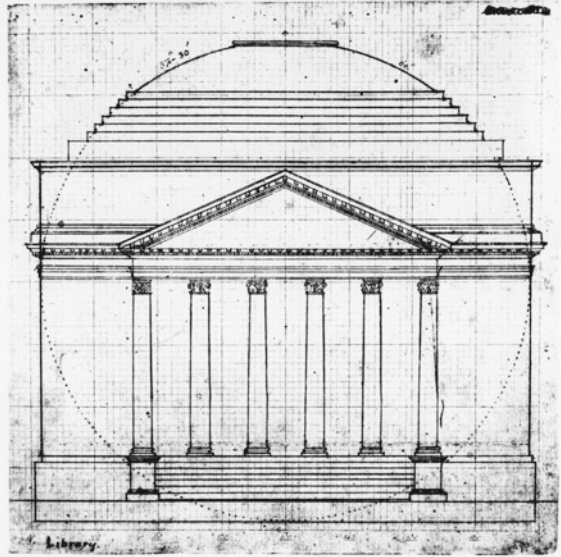
<sup>10</sup>Rockfish Gap, August 4, 1818, Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia. Reprinted in Cabell, N. F., ed., *Early History of the University of Virginia*, Richmond; text in <https://founders.archives.gov>. For the various influences in designing the plan, besides the already mentioned bibliographical references, see Loi, M. C., *Thomas Jefferson, Roma e l'antico*, in *American Latium*, ed. by Johns, C., Manfredi, T., Wolfe, K. (to be printed), and its bibliography; Benoit, M., Wilson, R. G., *Jefferson and Marly: Complex Influences*, in *Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles* 2012, <http://journals.openedition.org/crcv/11936>.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, "Manufactures". The relationship between city and countryside is central to the theoretical debates of eighteenth century Europe. Jefferson took part in this debate in its crucial years in Paris, from 1784 to 1789. However, the European model could not yet be introduced into the New World, which was slowly coming into existence on the new continent.

<sup>12</sup>On Jefferson's project for the new capital see Reps, J. W., *The Making of Urban America*, Princeton 1965; Id. *Monumental Washington*, Princeton 1967; Tafuri, M. *Progetto e Utopia*, Bari 1973, p. 35 and *passim*. See also Loi, M. C., *Gennaio 1902: i progetti per il centro di Washington della Mc Millan Commission*, in *Il Disegno e le Architetture della città eclettica*, a cura di Mozzoni, L., Santini, S., Liguori Editore, Napoli 2004, pp. 127–162.



**Fig. 4** Thomas Jefferson, The Rotunda, Façade. N328, K8. MSS 171, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (Courtesy of the University of Virginia Library)



ideology had strong political connotations. In this context architecture, “the most useful of all arts”<sup>13</sup> became a tool to communicate the values of independence and freedom of the young nation. All these ideas found expression in his first projects for the University.

Once he laid the groundwork to create better conditions for learning, Jefferson incorporated *exempla* of Antiquity into the project. Not only did he use different elements of the classical orders in the pavilions’ facades (almost like an architectural treatise in bricks and painted wood<sup>14</sup>) but he placed a temple-shaped building in a privileged position. His “americanized”—in size, material, organization of the interior spaces—Pantheon became the Library (Figs. 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). This “temple of knowledge” stood at the center of shorter side of the lawn<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 9).

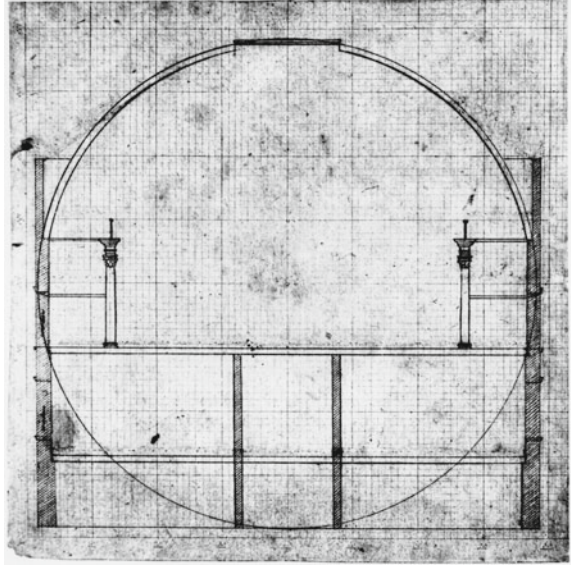
Despite the abundance of studies on the history of Thomas Jefferson’s project for the University of Virginia, there are still uncertainties regarding the specific role he actually played in defining the final project. As it is well known, several different

<sup>13</sup>“Jefferson’s Hints to Americans Travelling in Europe”, 19 June 1788, <https://founders.archives.gov>.

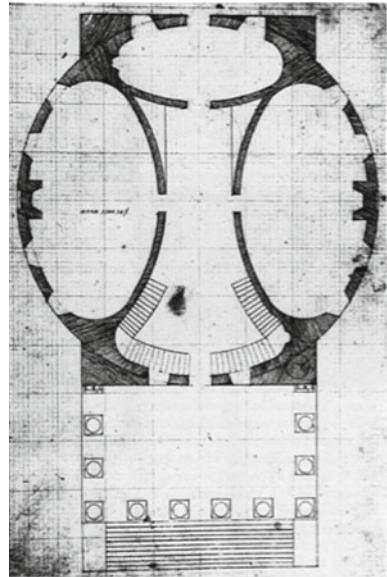
<sup>14</sup>He used the Doric order in Pavilion I (Diocletian Baths), IV (Temple in Albano), VII (Palladio’s *Quattro Libri dell’Architettura*), X (Theater of Marcello); the Ionic order in Pavilion II (Temple of Fortuna Virile, Rome), V (Palladio’s *Quattro Libri dell’Architettura*), VI (Teatro di Marcello), IX (Temple of Fortuna Virile, Rome); the Corinthian order in Pavilion III (Palladio’s *Quattro Libri dell’Architettura*), VIII (Diocletian Baths) and the Tuscan order for the colonnade which linked all the pavilions.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Rotunda, reduced to the proportions of the Pantheon and accomodated to the purposes of a Library for the University with rooms for drawing, music, examinations and other accessory purposes.” See <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/wilson/drawings>, N. 331.

**Fig. 5** Thomas Jefferson, The Rotunda, Section N329, K9. MSS 171, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (Courtesy of the University of Virginia Library)



**Fig. 6** Thomas Jefferson, The Rotunda, Plan, ground floor N330, K10. MSS 171, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia (Courtesy of the University of Virginia Library)



people were involved in the entire design process. Among them were two important architects: William Thornton and Benjamin Latrobe.

The exact role played by Jefferson and his main collaborators in the final design is still object of study and debate. The research aims to re-analyze the network of





relationships and possible influences that converged in the project, focusing especially on the years Jefferson spent in France as Ambassador, when he came in contact with artists, politicians, pedagogists and philosophers. It also analyzes his role in the foundation of the West Point Military Academy in 1802. In that instance, he was not involved in the architectural project, but his participation speaks to the importance that military education had for Jefferson, which is then reflected in the hierarchical layout of the University project. In addition, it is worth mentioning that in the same year while the project for the campus in Charlottesville was taking shape, other schools and military complexes were under construction, both in Europe and in North America. Those too may have influenced him.

Jefferson conceived such a project, thanks to the convergence of multiple ideas, people and influences. Together, not only did they shape the design for a new space devoted to learning, but they effectively gave birth to a new architectural typology of the American campus, an innovative model for the decades to come.

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