

Fresh Advices

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Williamsburg Architecture as Social Space

by Edward Chappell, director of architectural research

Like fine arts, economic theory, and social welfare, architecture is open to a wide range of interpretations. A striking example is the Royal Crescent in Bath, that classic monument of expensive English domestic design and town planning. One writer describes the Crescent as a building of "elegant beauty and magnificent proportions," while another sees it as a "sort of collective palace for an itinerant and socially mobile agrarian capitalist elite."

The point is that architectural history, like conventional history, is not an attempt to collect and accurately present all knowable information about its subject. Construction methods and materials are the focus of questions most often asked by visitors, and they are questions that we should be able to answer in detail. Rather than the final objects of our inquiries, though, these details need to be the basis for weighty, interpretive questions that are framed by our interest in different people and cultures. To be good history our answers should be more than the sum of their component sources — whether they are diaries and inventories or room proportions and beaded siding.

In recent years architectural historians have used buildings as background for asking questions about how social ideas and conditions changed over time. Two principal changes that American and British scholars have begun to define are people's increasing desire for order in their environment and a parallel growth in concern for buildings that express their owner's position in the community. The most evident, as well as the earliest, expression of environmental order in Williamsburg is the town plan. A simplified baroque design with straight streets, visual axes, and rec-

tangular public spaces, it was a large-scale ordering effort that required alteration of the landscape and removal of buildings that failed to conform to the new order.

Similar concern for order can be seen in individual domestic complexes, as in the tendency to arrange facade window and door openings symmetrically and in the occasional placement of a house at the center of a more or less balanced configuration of outbuildings. The broad social context of such ordering of architectural elements has received considerable attention, especially in the work of Henry Glassie and James Deetz.

The concern for order was a pervasive force that affected functional as well as visual arrangements. From the late Middle Ages onward, functions within buildings were increasingly separated into different rooms. Architectural historian Dell Upton has compiled statistics from room-by-room inventories to show that the most common house occupied by late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Virginians of affluence consisted of two rooms on each of two floors, usually within a one-and-a-half-story form. The first-floor rooms were most often a "hall" (principal living room) and a smaller "chamber," sometimes called a "parlor" (the main bedroom). The second-floor rooms were used for sleeping. Upton has also found an increased incidence as the eighteenth century wore on of a third first-floor room, which was most often used as a dining room.

Functions and room proportions could be combined in a number of ways. For example, a hall and chamber might be arranged parallel to the street, as at the George Reid House, or the hall might be placed in front of the chamber to form a double-pile building, like the Tayloe House. A third room was sometimes contained in a rear ell like that at the Geddy House and sometimes incorporated into a compact plan like that of the Robert Carter House. Alternately, three rooms could form the basis for a more self-consciously stylish

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design like the Semple House. In short, houses with different exterior appearances could contain similar combinations of social spaces.

An element somewhat common to the various combinations, and especially prevalent among surviving Williamsburg houses, is a circulation space allowing independent access to the different rooms. The most common circulation space was a rectangular passage running *between* the rooms (as at the Powell-Waller House) or *beside* them (like in the Palmer House). An alternative more common to New England than to the Chesapeake was a small lobby in front of a central chimney. Archaeology indicates that the easternmost part of the Peyton Randolph House probably began as a lobby-entrance house. Like passages, lobbies sometimes contained stairs, although lobbies in the eighteenth-century additions to Wetherburn's Tavern and the John Blair House lack them.

The desire for separation of functions expressed by passages and lobbies is more graphically demonstrated by suppressed kitchens. Because of the heat, smells, and activities of cooking, as well as the people working there, kitchens were removed to cellars (as at the Blair House and Redwood Ordinary) or, more often, to detached buildings. While there may be some truth to modern notions about danger from cooking fires, the high survival rate for these early service buildings in rural Virginia indicates that social and functional segregation was the principal reason for detached kitchens. It was not until after the Civil War that most kitchens were incorporated into the main building of substantial households in the Chesapeake.

Although concern for order and privacy grew in the eighteenth century, a twentieth-century level of delicacy was neither possible nor probably desired. We know, for example, that at certain times the view from Palace Green included industrial waste from the Geddy property and the tar-covered clapboard roof of the Brush-Everard House. Tall fences enclosed more horses and cows than formal parterres at the rear of domestic lots, and the same fences were the only barriers between vegetable gardens and street animals. More importantly, most Virginians lived in houses that were tiny and — by modern standards — poorly built, a characteristic that has usually precluded their survival. The fact that this was especially true for blacks is indicated by

the total absence of surviving Williamsburg structures built solely to house slaves.

Further, we know that ideas about architecture did not remain static in eighteenth-century Williamsburg. When the Governor's Palace was begun in 1706, it must have seemed a very odd dwelling to Virginians, whose previous experience with such building scale in the region was confined to the public buildings at opposite ends of Duke of Gloucester Street. Despite its initial position as an unequaled domestic complex, the original Palace satisfied governors' social needs for less than a half-century. Beyond its passages and service rooms, the first floor was, after all, little more than one of Upton's three-room plans. By 1751 its rooms were considered too confining for the type of entertaining that Governor Dinwiddie and others desired, and the rear ell was added. The new wing contained only two rooms, a large dining room with the square proportions of a hall and a ballroom with the astounding length of forty-seven and a half feet. Lord Botetourt's note that "Fifty two dined with me yesterday, and I expect at least that number today" represents a scale of public entertainment that was possible only after enlargement of the Palace.

This mid-century development at the Palace can be related to changes in private houses and taverns in Williamsburg. Dinwiddie's desire for additional public space was shared by the community who extended their buildings with smaller but comparable additions. Perhaps the best example is the Peyton Randolph House. When built early in the eighteenth century, the western part of the Randolph House was one of the most substantial houses in Williamsburg. Its owner apparently was William Robertson, a prominent member of the colony's political elite and clerk of the Council for thirty-eight years. His house was a full two stories high with three rooms and a stair lobby on each floor. Its facade, oriented toward North England Street, was frankly asymmetrical because the exterior door opened into the corner lobby.

After about 1724 the house was owned by two men of similar political and social position. The first, John Randolph, variously held the offices of clerk and speaker of the House of Burgesses, attorney general, and treasurer of the colony. Peyton, his son, was speaker of the house and president of the Continental Congress. Around mid-century the Randolphs transformed the building by adding a

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A Colonial Urban Housewife's Schedule

In the following conjectural timetable Pat Gibbs lays out the weekday routine of a well-to-do housewife in an eighteenth-century Virginia town. Despite Pat's wide survey of available sources, she has had to make educated guesses in places. Letters, diaries, books of advice on domestic economy, and reminiscences of how the best households operated give us telling, but incomplete, information. Pat also compiled an expanded version with rationale and footnotes that is available in the research department. As you will see, this schedule applies to the homemaker with an extensive staff, so her work is mainly supervisory.

At about 6:00 A.M. she rises, awakens the family, and sees that breakfast preparations have begun. (If a trusted maid is part of the staff and the maid assures her that the household is up and at work, the lady of the house might not leave her chamber.) Freshening up, dressing, and arranging her hair are part of the morning routine, of course. Some women used the couple of hours before breakfast to listen to the children's catechism and prayers and for their own private devotions.

Near 7:30 A.M. the exemplary housewife surveys the house and kitchen (and maybe the garden as well) to see what tasks need to be accomplished that day and to make certain that the morning meal will be served on time.

At 8:00 A.M. breakfast is served, and the housewife spends a half-hour at table with her family. (Sunday breakfasts were later and longer in some homes.)

Beginning about 8:30 AM. while the slaves and servants eat breakfast, the lady of the house washes the fine glasses and china, then arranges serving pieces and condiments for the dinner table. After the staff finishes eating, the mistress gives orders to the cook and measures out ingredients for each dinner dish; then instructs other workers on their chores for the day and gives them the necessary supplies.

From about 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. the mistress supervises work in and around the house, perhaps assisted by teenaged daughters while younger children receive lessons. Daily household chores include cooking, cleaning, dairying, and gardening. Two to four times a month there is washing and ironing to be done. Depending on the season, the staff cuts out and sews clothing, knits, pre-

serves fruits and vegetables, salts down meats, or makes sausages.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays the Williamsburg housewife would procure fresh meats, fish, dairy products, and produce from the market. She might shop or send a member of her staff. (Because of the market twice a week, local housewives spent less time around gardens, dairies, and poultry yards than plantation mistresses. Williamsburg inventories list few garden tools, few milk pans and churns, and no fowl.)

Just before 2:00 P.M. she checks on the kitchen help's progress with dinner and then goes to her room to freshen up and maybe change outer garments before dinner.

About 2:00 P.M. she presides over the table with her family and guests. Dinner, the most elaborate meal of the day, was also the most formal and the longest.

Just after dinner she sees that the kitchen is put in order and directs the afternoon's baking of hot breads for supper and of desserts and bread for the next day's dinner.

Beginning about 4:00 P.M. the housewife has three hours or so of her own time, since the staff has already received instructions for the whole working day. She shops at local stores or pays visits to friends or to the sick or needy. If she stays home, she gives needlework lessons to young daughters, practices music, reads, or entertains friends over tea or coffee.

About 7:30 P.M. she checks on the preparations for supper, which was generally little more than a snack and very simple to get ready.

8:00 P.M. is suppertime for the family and guests, and afterwards she sees that the kitchen is put in order and fires are banked for the night.

From about 8:30 P.M. until 10:00 or 11:00 P.M. the housewife, her family, and guests socialize at home or with neighbors. Their evening activities include conversation, singing, listening to music, reading aloud, and playing cards. Occasionally the lady and her husband might attend plays, lectures, or balls.

The woman who used her time this way was, of course, the ideal housewife and manager. The routine as set out here was always subject to disruptions due to illness in the household, mothering of infants, and the training of new household slaves.

The College of William and Mary and some Virginia households began their schedules an hour later in wintertime to take better advantage of natural light.

Architecture, *continued*

four-bay section between the Robertson house and the (now reconstructed) lobby-entrance house to the east.

Everything about the addition reveals a desire for increased social space and enhanced architectural imagery. Each floor contained a large square hall and a passage approximately twice the size of the old lobby. Like the stairs in the Wythe and Brush-Everard houses, the new stair was designed for visual effect as well as circulation, and its landing was lighted by a great round-headed window similar to those at Rosewell in Gloucester County. As part of the general upgrading, paneling was added to earlier rooms, and the status of the new hall as the principal room for entertaining was emphasized with walnut doors, brass hinges, and an imported marble mantel. Because the Randolph's house was the result of enlargements, its exterior does not have the perfectly ordered appearance of houses constructed in one campaign, like the Wythe and Ludwell-Paradise houses. The intentions behind the design of its elevation are, however, the same. The front of the main block facing Market Square is a roughly symmetrical seven-bay facade, while the elements of change are clearly evident on the rear.

In the same era Wetherburn's Tavern and the John Blair and Benjamin Waller houses were extended with large new halls. The social-significance of these rooms was again emphasized by their details. Wetherburn's and the Blair halls were fitted with marble mantels, and the mantel in the Waller hall was flanked by buffets for displaying family possessions. In each case the new rooms were given independent access through a passage or lobby. The Apollo Room at the Raleigh Tavern was another prominent entertainment space, one with a relatively elaborate interior documented by Benson Lossing's nineteenth-century engraving. It is worth nothing that the Apollo first appeared in the records in 1751, before the wing was added to the Palace. The date suggests that the governor's ballroom was part of a mid-century trend, not necessarily the precursor of fashion.

Building forms and details are interesting subjects for historical as well as aesthetic analysis. Those few described here evince a social climate in which substantial architectural images and large-scale spaces for entertainment became more important.

One problem confronting the development of a fuller social context for Williamsburg's

early architecture is the lack of precise dating for many of our buildings. Until we know who built or added to buildings and at what point in their careers they made these choices, our interpretations will be somewhat limited. Archival sources combined with structural analysis provide information about some construction dates; others are entirely uncertain. One potential source for such information is dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, which has recently supplied exact building dates for some Chesapeake buildings. For example, we now know that Bacon's Castle was built in 1665. Like more traditional means of research, dendrochronology is only a tool that can provide data. It is the responsibility of thoughtful historians to use this information not as an end in itself, but as material toward the interpretation of the town's social history.

Recommended Reading

Books and Articles Related to Architecture as Social Space

- Cary Carson. "Doing History with Material Culture" in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby. New York, N. Y., 1978.
- James Deetz. *In Small Things Forgotten*. Garden City, N. Y., 1977.
- Henry Glassie. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*. Knoxville, Tenn., 1975.
- Fraser D. Neiman. "Domestic Architecture at the Clifts Plantation," *Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Magazine*, XVIII (December 1978).
- Marcus Whiffen. *The Eighteenth-century Houses of Williamsburg*. Williamsburg, Va., 1960.
- Dell Upton. "Vernacular Domestic Planning in Eighteenth-century Virginia," *Winterthur Portfolio*, XVII (1982), forthcoming.

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