

**T.J.'s Houses and Gardens**  
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**Katherine Neville**

From: Katherine Neville  
To: Lynn Beebe and Travis McDonald  
Poplar Forest  
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Dear Lynn and Travis--

Here are my notes on TJ's two kinds of architecture: esoteric and exoteric.

As I mentioned earlier, the history of sacred architecture is very old. The very earliest ancient architecture that was built on a massive scale was initially built for sacred purposes--in China, Burma, Chichen Itza, the Ka'aba at Mecca, the Dome of the Rock, or Hindu and Zoroastrian fire alters, Gothic cathedrals--and its purpose was to connect humanity and nature with the universe through repeated patterns that are found in the cosmos and nature. Kosmos means "order." It also means "ornament." These patterns were communicated through Geomatria: born from the earth.

The term esoteric (inner) was coined in order to contrast with exoteric (outer); the contrast was originally created to describe Aristotle's two methods of teaching: his popular lectures, which were written down and given publicly (exo) usually in the form of dialogues, while his private lectures were often taken from his personal notes and given as "oral instruction designed for initiates only" (eso). These private lectures were originally called acroamatic (designed to be heard) and were regarded as deep learning--highly scientific in content--destined only for his "hearers." (Those who had ears.) TJ would have known this, for this was still the standard definition of Esoteric from the time of Aristotle until early in the 20th century.

Monticello is exoteric in the extreme--gangs of visitors showed up, TJ and his family were on public display, and the house itself makes that overt statement, because it faces east--the path of entry for initiation in every "organized" or accepted religion--facing the rising sun.

North is the entry path into secret, hidden, or esoteric wisdom, the path of those who are already initiated. Poplar Forest is entered from the north. And that's not all. At

Poplar Forest we find the following idiosyncrasies, some of them possibly unique in housing construction--though most of them would fit right in at any pagan temple:

-Entry:

To enter the house (from the North), we either have to circumvent or pass through a boxwood labyrinth (or a circular rose garden, which it might have been--I'll explain the significance of what the differences would be later.)

-Nested Geometry:

The house is a square within an octagon within a circle (the circular road you've recently discovered.) This is critical, because the octagon is the intermediate step between the square and the circle--"Squaring the Circle" being the biggest mathematical-geometric-esoteric mystery, predating even Pythagoras. The square represents Earth, mother, mater, matter, matrix (womb). The Circle represents the heavens, father, pater, pattern (vibration), god. The octagon connects these two and transforms one into the other. It's a bit of each.

(Comment aside: the octagon room at Monticello on the other hand is truly a "hidden aspect"--nobody went there, it served no purpose, it's one of the biggest rooms in the house, but unfurnished, the enormous baseboards are--as one guide pointed out--surreal, like Alice down the rabbit hole, even the windows are designed so it seems that you are inside of an eight-sided, stand-alone structure, *and* it has a very rare and valuable *OCCULUS* in the (circular) dome. More about this "hidden aspect" of Monticello later. It's a secret message.)

-The Square dining room is actually a Cube--representing an altar. The Holy of Holies at Jerusalem was a cube, the Ka'aba ("cube") at Mecca was likely originally an actual cube. Here's TJ's version: Twenty by twenty by twenty means that it is the FIRST cube in mathematics:  $2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$ . The altar (from "altare"=high place, deep, increased, grown) is where things are altered ("alterare"=other, make a change in, make different.)

"Ara the Altar" is one of the earliest constellations recorded by both Arab and Greek astronomers--interestingly, some thought the stars formed a circle and others, a cube. TJ has a skylight in his dining cube that runs from east to west--indicating that this altar is dedicated to solar observation.

The lunettes above each east-west stairway support that dedication to solar rays. As we shall see.

-The Octagon:

Vitruvius, whom Palladio calls his "master and guide," dedicates much of Book I in "On Architecture" to how to build such an octagonal structure--like the Tower of Winds at Athens--which he considers critical to city planning, and much else.

At Poplar Forest, since the house entrance faces north, the entire house serves as a giant, architectural Compass Rose, facing the compass points starting with north--and it also serves as a calendar, marking solstices and equinoxes--including the "Cross Quarter Days" in between. These are the eight sacred Celtic fire festivals which are still observed in many arts of Europe. They are: Spring Equinox; *Beltaine* (May 1); Summer Solstice; *Lammas* (August 1); Autumn Equinox; *Samhain* (Hallowe'en); Winter Solstice; and *Brigantia* (Groundhog Day=Great Celtic Goddess.)

The cosmic calendar does tie in too with TJ's clock obsession--but I'm not covering that here. The oculus in the dome room at Monticello reinforces the "hidden" cosmic theme of the octagon room.

(Comment aside: *The Ossian Saga*)

At first, I thought this design was just coincidence--even if TJ's father was Welsh and therefore connected--and that TJ just liked playing with geometric shapes, that none of this geometry had to do with Celtic rituals and lore (even including the symbolic trees that we'll get to next.) Then I read Chastellux, who arrived at Monticello before TJ had been to Europe. The marquis describes how cold and stand-offish TJ seemed to him at first--*BUT THEN THEY STARTED QUOTING FROM MEMORY, FROM OSSIAN!* They both quote from memory for hours, astounding Chastellux's friends, who'd never read the book--until at last a copy of the book is brought out, along with a bowl of punch, and they stay up all night gabbing and male bonding. This all-night male coven is even *more* bizarre, given that TJ's wife Martha is alive, extremely pregnant, close to labor in the next room, and sick enough that TJ refuses to leave the house at all the next day to accompany his guests who are going to visit Natural Bridge.

*Ossian* is the Celtic saga that the Scottish poet James MacPherson had recently "discovered" (invented, actually)--purportedly, it's his "translation" from the text of an ancient Celtic bard. It electrified Europe, and was especially embraced by the repressed indigenous Britons (Irish, Scots, Welsh) who felt it revived their long-lost ancient culture.

We know that TJ read widely and deep. But have we ever heard of him "quoting all night from memory?" --surely not from Cicero or Lawrence Sterne. How many times had he read the Ossianic ballads? The scene itself sounds like it came from the bards: the men down in the drinking hall, banging pewter mugs for more ale while recounting tales of glory from their ancestors. Hmm. Curioser and curioser.)

-The Cross:

At each cardinal direction of the house at Poplar Forest, there is an appendage--a building structure, parterre, front drive, or allée. These form what we call a "Greek" (equal-arm) cross. It is also a Celtic cross (=4 seasons, 4 humors, 4 elements)--sort of like "spokes" extending from the "hub" of the octagon toward the "wheel" of the

outer circle drive. On the east-west axis we then have two mounds of earth that TJ created by his own design. (Directly beyond the solar “lunettes” of the interior stairways.)

Circular mounds always represent a sacred connection between heaven and earth, like Mt Meru (or “Monticello.”) TJ, likewise, constructed the “Jefferson Mounds” on the south lawn of the White House.

At Poplar Forest he planted his created mounds with aspen and willow trees, both members of the Salicaceae. Aspen (gold, sun, male) grows up toward the sky; willow (silver, moon, female) bends down toward earth-water.

#### -Trees:

The Druids, Celts and Gypsies had one thing in common: they didn’t simply *like* trees--or even just worship trees--their *LANGUAGE* was based on trees. In the case of Celts, it was Ogham, where each letter of the alphabet was the name of a tree.

Much research has been done on this, e.g., Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* covers how to decipher the meaning of early works like the *Cad Goddeau* (Battle of Trees), and the great scholar CG Leland also explored the Gypsy tree language. Fraser’s *The Golden Bough* deals with the significance of Greek tree meanings--especially those in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. (More of this later, since it goes directly to TJ’s “Palladio” connection and to where TJ might have found part of his inspiration to construct cosmic temples.)

TJ didn’t need to bone up on gypsy tree lore, however--he knew plenty about trees and seems to have been born a tree-rights activist. We’ve all read the famous quote where he says “I wish I was a despot that I might save the noble...trees, etc.” And then he describes “the unnecessary felling of a tree” as “an act little short of murder.” (This, while he was president of the U.S.! And I concur!)

TJ’s most important esoteric tree is the poplar--Eadha=“E”, equates with the white poplar, and quaking aspen--one of the five sacred Celtic trees representing the vowel sounds in the Ogham (Druid) alphabet. TJ loved all poplars--he personally planned and actually supervised the planting of rows of Lombardy Poplars along Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House to the Capitol--the most important route in the initial layout of DC--esoterically, as well. But at Monticello, it was the oak (Duir=“D”, Door, midsummer fires kindled in an oak log, the overt, exoteric sacred tree of northern Europe--also appearing in *The Golden Bough*--which returns us again to Virgil and *The Aeneid*: the oak’s mistletoe protects Aeneas so he can enter the sacred realm.)

#### -Circular (Poplar) Forests and Puzzle Gardens:

In the newly-discovered clumps that TJ planted in front of what I think of as the “Cross-Quarter” windows of the Poplar Forest octagon, according to the list Jack gave us last week, there are: balsam, Athenian, and tulip poplars (liriodendron) as well as

redbuds, dogwoods, locusts and calycanthus--all planted so closely together that they are like mini-forests and can grow no way but upward, competing for light. I know what the light and poplars mean--I'm still working on the significance of the other trees.

We now have learned that there were circles on every side of the octagon except the south. Four forests at the cross-quarters, two forests on the mounds to east and west--all filled with many poplars, which grow very tall, very quickly (see below under "High Tree"). And a circle on the north side that now contains a boxwood labyrinth--but might initially have been a rose garden. No circle that we know of existed on the southern parterre, nothing but "clover, dandelions and weeds" (signifying that *my* Virginia lawn is historically accurate!)

#### -POPLARS AND LIGHT:

In Aspen, Colorado, where I use to live, they say that there is a corresponding ecological system between aspen poplars and conifers. When pine/spruce forests burn, the fire gets very hot--sometimes 1000 degrees. Aspen nuts require extreme heat to pop open. The aspens grow quickly, and, as tall trees with a shallow root system, they hold the soil from erosion, and meanwhile they provide a high canopy to shade the young conifers that will establish well in the rich ash soil. The aspens topple over once the conifers re-establish, and they provide more fodder for the young trees' growth.

Jefferson may have been an "old man and a young gardener"--but his knowledge of trees was incredible. As Jack Gary said at our luncheon session: He could only have planted those circles that way if he wanted them to grow straight up, and never develop into the broad trees they were meant to be. "Striving toward the light," we call it in esoteric terms.

But looking at TJ's Exoteric house, Monticello, we must ask: Why plant a bunch of (lightning-attracting) oaks, when you are living atop a mountain? And at Poplar Forest: Why plant a thick, dense, impenetrable arboreal canopy, when you are living nearly in a valley? Next point:

#### -HIGH TREE:

Palo Alto (where "my" Karl used to teach at Stanford) means "High Tree." Every sacred spot in ancient times--the place where the oracle prophesied, the place where Charlemagne and the early kings of England held the first legal courts of Europe--was always situated beneath a high tree. The architectural orders of marble columns were made originally of tree trunks and possibly based upon the designs of trees, which had originally held up the roofs of the lodges of rulers named after them, like the early "Red Branch Kings" in *Cuchulain*.

The ancient High Trees--seats of judgment and thinking about long-range plans (Strategy)--were oaks. The immediate High Trees--"the shields" in Celtic lore, which protected us and let us move forward swiftly and with promise (tactics)--were poplars.

Jefferson planted Oaks where he knew his exoteric (Classical-Enlightenment) life would establish deep roots--at Monticello. And he planted Poplars where he felt that his esoteric (Renaissance-Romantic) life needed shielding, shelter, high aspirations, and a shallow root system to prevent erosion of ideals--at Poplar Forest. (Let's not forget--he also planted Poplars, not Oaks--along Pennsylvania Avenue!)

#### -LABYRINTH vs ROSE GARDEN:

It remains unclear to Poplar Forest archaeologists whether the circle, as we approach the Poplar Forest front door, was originally filled with boxwood labyrinth or rose garden. Each means something different symbolically.

Theseus found his way through the labyrinth with the help of Ariadne, Queen of Beasts, sister of the Minotaur. The labyrinth signifies the left-hand (counter-clockwise) spiral--the journey within, where we find ourselves, our true connection with reality. (As opposed to the clockwise spiral which would mean the Quest, journey to another level.) The Rose means the Divine Mystery. In Dante (whose own "master and guide" was Virgil) -- this is God, the "Multifoliate Rose."

(Comment aside: I suspect that TJ would have made the circle outside the *front* door correspond with whatever he had done around the rest of the octagon: that is, the plants *themselves* would have had symbolic meaning, rather than significance in the design in which they were arranged. Besides this--in TJ's era, labyrinths were typically at the side of the house or on the back parterre. So I vote for the rose garden as his choice--but I add that there are several esoterically trained architectural historians of my acquaintance who've studied Poplar Forest and prefer the labyrinth idea. Maybe, in the end, we'll find it was something completely different from either.)

#### -T.J. AND THE TEMPLE:

Dan Jordan (president of Monticello) recently sent us a fascinating article by William Beiswanger (Monticello's architectural historian) on TJ's original preferred design for the Virginia State Capitol (*Update*, Spring 2007.) WB says, "It [the capitol] was to be in the form of a temple"--likely inspired by Leoni's translation of Palladio's Four Books, of which TJ owned a copy--and he points out how extraordinary it was in that era to put a government building in that form.

This idea is really supported by all the data I've just mentioned about the importance of sacred architecture in connecting heaven and earth, man and cosmos--and it is supported by something else of importance I've alluded to above: Palladio.

#### -THE PALLADIO CONNECTION:

Hugh Howard mentions in *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* that TJ regarded Palladio's *Quattro Libri* as his "Bible," and he thinks it may be the very architecture book that TJ

bought from a cabinet maker while still a college freshman and already a “rabid” book collector. (I’m afraid I was bitten by the same frothing beast.)

But he also mentions TJ’s early fluency with classical languages, that he read Latin and Greek authors “with skill and satisfaction.” So it might have been Vitruvius that TJ bought--the Ten Books “On Architecture” (Palladio’s own “Bible”)--that 1st Century, BC book which, in Palladio’s day, had just been rediscovered in a monastery and translated from Latin to Italian. with numerous versions annotated by great architects. Vitruvius was wildly popular. Though today he is rarely mentioned in the same breath with Palladio--much less with TJ--in fact from the 1400s when he was rediscovered, Vitruvius was the “*chief authority studied by architects, and at every point his precepts were accepted as final [by] Bramante, Michelangelo, Vignola...*” (1911 Encyclopedia Britannica)--and most of all, by Palladio, who called Vitruvius “the only ancient writer on this art.”

Even if this wasn’t the book that TJ bought while at William and Mary, it’s hard to imagine he wasn’t familiar with Vitruvius--who is mentioned and credited on nearly every page of Palladio. Equally hard to imagine is TJ--armed with his grammar school grounding in Latin--not being intimate with Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the standard literary text. If he was, though, it would lead to a pretty interesting observation about TJ’s architecture.

Marcus Vitruvius Pollio (Vitruvius) and Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) wrote their two books--*On Architecture* and *The Aeneid*--at the same exact period (just as the Roman Empire was being established) and they dedicated them both to the same patron (Augustus, Rome’s first emperor.) They were completed between 19 BC when Virgil died, and 11 BC when Vitruvius’ sponsor, to whom he refers as alive in the book, also died. (That is, Octavia, Augustus’s sister and the wife whom Marc Antony cast off for Cleopatra.)

This period--19 to 11 BC--is a critical link in the history of architecture--temple building, city building, nation building, empire building. And a link that Thomas Jefferson would be very unlikely to miss. It’s a link that certainly the young architect Andrea della Gondola, in the mid-1500s, hadn’t missed--or he wouldn’t have taken as his professional name: “Palladio.”

#### -THE PALLADIUM:

We recall the Palladium, the famous statue resembling Pallas Athene, which fell from the skies and thereafter protected Troy--until Odysseus stole it, permitting Troy then to be destroyed by “Greeks bearing gifts.” Trojan prince Aeneas then took the Palladium from Troy to Italy, via Carthage on the African coast--bypassing all of Greece, including Athens, the city founded by the goddess herself. Athens wanted the Palladium, but Aeneas built a temple for on a hill in Italy, later called Rome.

At the rise of the Roman Empire and Augustus, the Palladium was still there, protecting Rome, which was now dubbed the “Second Troy.” Virgil. the great Latin

poet, wrote the foundation myth explaining why Rome--a republic newly expanded into a global empire--had always been destined to triumph over the barbaric northerners and anarchical Greeks. But now Augustus--following Egypt, India, China, all long-term civilization-builders--needed to show that this new empire was also in keeping with the Divine Cosmic Harmony in its physical manifestation: sacred architecture. (The very word was Greek, not Latin: Arche=first, Tektos=builder.) The Palladium was the key--the baton bypassed Greece--and it remained so, 1500 years later, when there were more barbarians at the gate sacking Rome (this time the Austrians)--and just at the moment when young Andrea "Palladio" was reviving architecture all'antica.

It's really interesting, as in the Beiswanger article, that TJ's first public building attempt was a temple--just like Aeneas--and also H. Howard's frequent comments that TJ "delighted [in the idea of] a universal order." That's what the ten books of Vitruvius are all about: universal order and how we can best connect with it.

Vitruvius wasn't much of an architect, having experience mainly in ballistics (catapults)--but he recorded everything known about early architecture--especially the ancient (pre-Pythagorean) Greeks, with their fondness for octagons. I'm not going here into all the connections between his books and TJ's houses. But there's plenty that appears in Vitruvius, and in TJ's residences, but not in Palladio. (Many believe that Palladio likewise had intended ten books but due to his ambitious hands-on building schedule he only got up to four.)

A few of those Vitruvian topics for starters--some already discussed above:

- Use of the cube, circle and octagon together;
- Importance of establishing an octagonal structure before laying out a new city;
- Symmetry between temples and the human body (Divine Symmetry);
- First to lay out (three) architectural orders and describe their proportions;
- On Harmonics*--the Romans didn't have this science, he says--just the Greeks (Later scholars find this section heavy weather--but not if they'd read the Pythagoreans);
- Proper directional exposures of temples, public buildings, houses, rooms;
- Book ix* is completely on cosmic order: planets, lunar phases, constellations, astrology and weather predictions, and "TELLING TIME"--Sundials and water clocks;
- Book x* is on machinery, water wheels, mills, and engines for raising water--things TJ studied, wrote about, and/or built himself.

My personal favorite:

-*Book One* is about the proper education of an architect in both applied skills and theory, including but not limited to: pencil sketching, geometry, arithmetic, philosophy, music, medicine, law, astronomy...

"I think," says Vitruvius, "that men have no right to profess themselves architects hastily, without climbing from boyhood the steps of these studies and thus, nursed by the knowledge of many arts and sciences, having reached the height of the holy ground of architecture."

Wouldn't TJ say Amen to that?