

# Looking at Buildings

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An underlying assumption of all outdoor history museums is that it is possible to gain a special understanding of the past through material culture. Otherwise, the lessons we teach at institutions like Colonial Williamsburg might be addressed more easily in comfortable lecture halls and libraries than in preserved and re-created past environments. It is less obvious exactly how to deal with specific artifacts as sources of historical information. Queen Anne chairs and Greek Revival houses do not speak to us directly, so how should we approach the information they have to offer? Architectural historians, curators, and archaeologists all have their favorite means of inquiry, and we should feel free to choose from among the different techniques. Yet intelligent analysis requires us to recognize the biases and limitations as well as the benefits of each system. I will review two accepted methods and offer a third alternative that draws concepts from each.

Since the nineteenth century the most common system for studying antique objects has been an approach generally known as connoisseurship. Connoisseurship involves, first, recognition of an object's style (rococo plasterwork, Pre-Raphaelite painting, or postmodern tablewares), and, secondly, assessment of how well the object was designed and executed within that mode. A critic might analyze how successfully a thirteenth-century designer incorporated a round window into the essentially rectangular composition of a Gothic cathedral facade, or how naturalistically a sixteenth-century painter handled the drapery in a portrait. William Pierson uses this analytical method on a familiar architectural subject when he writes, "The whole effect of the Wren Building is sharp, brittle, and angular. Although it is symmetrical and has a cupola and classical details, it still echoes the provincial medievalism of earlier seventeenth-century buildings in Virginia, like Bacon's Castle." Such a system for appreciating the special visual qualities of artifacts has been considered worthwhile because it allows the viewer to say more than that he or she likes or dislikes an artifact. It provides a basis on which to form defensible aesthetic decisions.

The fact that connoisseurship is essentially a means of judging or appreciating the value of artifacts is also its principal problem. When people rather than artifacts are analyzed, the aesthetic judgments are often simply transferred to the makers or owners, providing means of evaluating their aesthetic or constructional capabilities. A craftsman who creates chairs that consistently adhere to the canons of Chippendale's *Director* is recognized as bright, knowledgeable, and probably urban, while one whose products incorporate a few Chippendale motifs without embracing the full range of his aesthetic is thought to be unschooled and rural. At best, the second fellow is seen as an imaginative copyist with an intriguing local style. Regionalism can of course attract its own connoisseurship, with attention focused on the best examples of the local style or alternately on questions of which region produced the most admirable products. In either view, chauvinism can be a chief result. Architectural historians have expended as much energy as curators pursuing this approach to material culture. The western progress of Palladianism from Vicenza to Richmond County has received its full share of textbook pages, leaving us with a few mildly convincing examples and a not very useful view of society.

Almost by definition, anthropologists, folklorists, and historians of vernacular architecture find themselves allied against the "good-better-best" perspective inherent in connoisseurship. Generally, these people see their purpose as the discovery of social or cultural systems that are expressed in activities (like cockfighting) or in artifacts (like houses). As a result, there is considerably more concern for why things are done a certain way than there is for clarification of what constitutes a successful product. A prominent instance of direct relevance to Williamsburg is *The Transformation of Virginia*, in which historian Rhys Isaac analyzes the imagery of eighteenth-century houses and public buildings as part of a system by which the Chesapeake gentry established and reinforced its social and political power. While he finds matters of form and scale to be of importance, Isaac has little

use for such issues as, say, how successfully John Tayloe adapted English Palladian ideals at Mt. Airy.

In this regard Isaac draws on recent studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century vernacular buildings, which have focused on shifts in structural techniques and building forms almost to the exclusion of decoration. Most prominent among these is a complex and somewhat unresolved book called *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia*. In it folklorist Henry Glassie poses questions about essential changes in the community based on the apparent rise in concern for privacy and visual order. Glassie further argues—perhaps rhetorically—that architectural decoration merely diverts attention from the crucial issue of form.

The latter point is an important one to consider. Analysis of the form of a building is clearly more useful than sheer recognition and description of its style. Yet levels of finish represent more than the simple choice of a decorative mode, and both form and finish represent a potentially complex group of decisions with some sort of psychological, social, or cultural basis. As a result, attention to the connections between form and finish can be instructive.

Using various systems of visual analysis can help to establish for any artifact type the range of possible forms and details. The point is not to record every existing variation, but to recognize the range of possibilities. The next, more important, step is to determine why a particular set of choices was made. For eighteenth-century Virginia furniture, for example, a small group of ceremonial government and Masonic chairs establishes an outpost of decorative possibility and raises the question of why some chairs are more enriched than others. Form, finish, and scale all constitute a hierarchial range from which people with a variety of intentions and means may choose. But what is the basis of their choices?

Specifically, building hierarchies reflect people's differing abilities and desires to expend capital on architectural space and its elaboration. While variation is perhaps more obviously related to financial resources—compare Carter's Grove to the Timson House—there is also tremendous variation possible within the product of a single capital expenditure.

At the most elemental level, hierarchies in buildings, like those in smaller artifacts, are reflections of a viewer's visual range. The front of

a delft plate is usually more elaborately embellished than its back. The front of a drawer chest is sometimes carefully finished, while the sides have exposed joints and inferior wood. On a larger scale, conspicuous consumption of wood framing is often confined to the fronts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English houses, while the sides and rears are framed in a purely structural rather than a decorative manner.

Hierarchies such as these are more informative when they reveal whose line of sight is involved. The Northampton County Jail at Eastville is an interesting example. Built about 1800, the small one-room jail was surrounded on two sides by a brick exercise yard wall that was integral to the building. The two walls originally visible to the public and outer surfaces of the yard enclosure were constructed of selected brick laid in a very careful (and expensive) Flemish bond with precise mortar joints. For the two walls set within the exercise yard and the inner face of the yard walls, a generally poor grade of brick was laid in a sloppy variable-course American bond with thick and uneven joints. The supervisors and builders of the Northampton Jail made an unmistakable distinction between different lines of sight: the exterior image of a publically financed building was important, but the visual qualities of the prisoners' realm was not worth the added expense.

A slightly more subtle indication of whose view was considered important is illustrated by a slave quarter at Tuckahoe in Goochland County. There, six buildings are grouped along a secondary axis 140 feet from the main house. Two duplex slave houses turn their backs to the eighteenth-century house and face a similar pair of buildings on the opposite side of the farm road. Significantly, the windows facing the main house were finished with relatively elaborate classical architraves while the doors facing the slaves' rather than the master's yard were left plain.

More commonly, the social meaning of rooms within houses is expressed by variation of detail. Hierarchial distinctions are almost always made between floors and among rooms on each floor. In general, the level of expense decreases as one moves from the most to the least public spaces. Thus, the first floors of hall-chamber and single-room houses often have plastered walls and exposed beaded or chamfered joists, while sleeping rooms in the attic remain entirely unfinished. On the first floor, halls are usually treated as superior to chambers, and

passages are sometimes superior to halls. A simple illustration can be found at the Orrell House on Francis Street. From the passage through the hall to the back room, the trim changes from a 7½" chair board embellished with a molded rail to a plain 7½" chair board to a plain 6" chair board. Chair boards are entirely omitted on the second floor. Throughout the first floor, all door frames are stock pieces with one superior and one inferior face. The superior face (with two rather than one cyma) is turned to the outside on both of the exterior entrances and toward the passage on the interior doorways. The frame between the hall and the rear room naturally faces the hall. The result is an otherwise confusing pattern with some superior and some inferior faces visible in both the passage and hall.

Because of their scale and multiplicity of social signals, the largest Chesapeake gentry houses display particularly elaborate internal decorative hierarchies. The sequences from public to private space, however, are often the same as in simpler houses. While the whole house might be expensively built, it was in the public rooms that a gentry owner

demonstrated his command of capital and his cultivated taste. At Carter's Grove, for example, the three first-floor rooms along the river front have full-height paneling enriched with pilasters, entablatures, and pedestal chair rails. Within this suite, the entrance hall is treated as superior. All its openings have surrounds, while only the fireplaces in the flanking rooms have classical frames. Its order is more complex (Ionic, not Doric), and its pilasters are deeper (three flutes instead of one). By contrast, the rear passage has paneling, entablatures, and pedestal chair rails, but pilasters are omitted. Full height paneling is also found in the less public land side rooms, but there paneled overmantels and molded chair rails suffice. Extension of the public space into the upper middle room is implied by the classical treatment of its entrance, but all rooms on the second floor have simple molded chair rails and no paneling (fig. 1).

The degree of social prominence intended for circulation spaces was clearly expressed in their finish. As Mark R. Wenger has pointed out, the lavish enrichment of the Carter's Grove entrance hall



Fig. 1. Section through front rooms, Carter's Grove, James City County. The upper stair, third floor, and roof line date from about 1930. Drawing: E. L. Phillips and J. F. Waite.

emphasizes the fact that this was the principal public room in addition to being a means of circulation. By contrast, the stair passages at Blandfield in Essex County were narrow spaces flanking two central saloons. Although they originally provided the only access to other first- and second-floor rooms, the Blandfield passages were significantly plainer than the rooms themselves. Their cornices and baseboards were smaller, and the stairways seem to have been finished with wood of modest quality. The second-floor passage was especially spartan: in order to reach six well finished second-floor bedrooms, the Beverleys and their guests passed through a long space with skimpy cornices, no wainscoting, and an original attic stair so crude that it is often assumed to be a later addition. Beyond the first-floor passages at Blandfield are lobbies and hyphens leading to workrooms and secondary domestic quarters housed

the stair hall and its exterior door, implying that the hall was thought of as less socially important than the river side room. Carter was financially able to finish all his rooms with the best grade of paneling, but he and his builders made certain choices that reinforced his ideas of how the house would function. The level of attention was such that would make a modern contractor shudder: the doors between the two principal rooms are finished so that the land face has single beads and the river face has multiple moldings, each reflecting its orientation (fig. 2).

Hierarchies of construction techniques are particularly evident in Chesapeake farm and town complexes. In groups such as the Roberts and Pruden farms in Isle of Wight, the houses are well built of brick or frame, often with prefabricated glazed windows and modillion cornices. Surviving contemporary kitchens and smokehouses are also

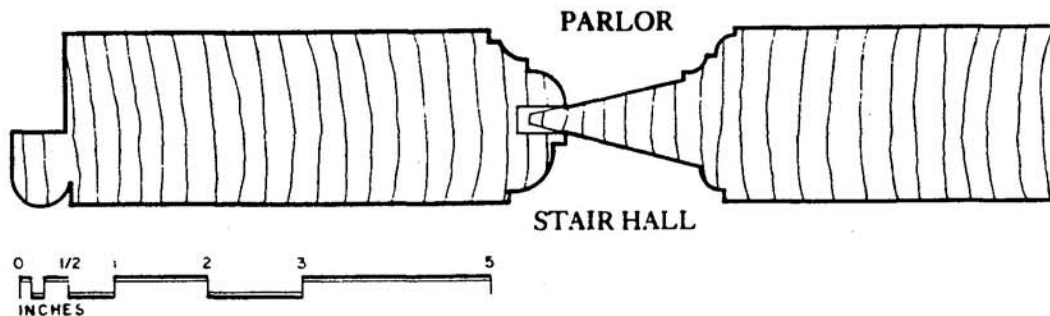


Fig. 2. Section through first-floor door, Shirley, Charles City County. Variation in the molding profiles reflects the superior status of the parlor. Drawing: J. J. Bernard.

in a pair of dependencies. Clearly envisioned as a realm of service activity, these spaces originally were left entirely unfinished: brick walls and roof framing were exposed and trim was omitted.

Often individual variations in detail are so subtle as to be barely perceptible. At Shirley the profile of the panel moldings is used to establish the superiority of the river side of the house. The presence of the stair hall on the land side and the degree of attention expended on the stair raise a question of orientation, but the details of the doors and paneling of the two principal rooms clarify John Carter's intentions. The river side room and both faces of its exterior door have panels, like those designed for the exterior of the Public Hospital, with bevels enriched by multiple moldings. Conversely, panels with ordinary quarter-round beads appear in

usually substantially crafted, often of frame with wood sills on low brick foundations. However, the kitchens and, obviously, the smokehouses are seldom plastered, they never have modillion cornices, and most often their eaves are partially unfinished and the underside of the joists are exposed on the exterior. Occasionally a stable or other building will represent a somewhat lower level of construction with unhewn or partially hewn posts that ignore sills and extend directly into the ground. Granaries are usually similar in finish to kitchens and smokehouses, but corncribs are generally inferior. An occasional framed crib survives, but most are built of unhewn logs, roughly saddle-notched and held together with a few heavy joists. Descriptions of slave housing, tobacco barns, and other buildings associated with work and workers make it even clearer that a very



broad range of quality existed, and that choices within the range were made largely in response to perceived categories of social importance.

In recent years recognition of these categories has led to the modification of paint schemes for some Historic Area lots. Increasingly, paddocks, stables, and work buildings are being painted with colors that were less expensive than those used for houses and stores. The Geddy Foundry has shed its coat of many colors in favor of a more realistic whitewash, and soon Wetherburn's stable will be painted in a manner that is less rather than more costly than the tavern itself. While avoiding a rigid formula, we have begun to make changes intended to illustrate social and functional variations within as well as among Williamsburg lots. One result is that a walk through a lot fronting on Duke of Gloucester Street, or a walk from the main street to Nicholson Street east of Market Square, better reveals some of the diversity that existed when properties were privately maintained.

Several recent studies have begun to show how architectural finish was manipulated in order to fulfill personal and civic agendas in eighteenth-century public buildings. Dell Upton has argued that, increasingly in the later colonial period, wealthy Virginians expended their own funds to create superior private zones inside parish churches. New family pews raised above the level of the general congregation effected selective social separation and forced the minister to share attention with the local gentry.

Research and fieldwork by Carl Lounsbury has also defined parts of the elaborate architectural system used to establish civic and social order in English and American courtrooms. In Virginia and elsewhere the focus of the courtroom was on an ascending order from rear to front and from low to high. Entering the rear of the courtroom, one would pass through a loggia or under a portico into a relatively unstructured space where spectators sat on backless benches or, more often, stood on a wood, stone, or brick-paved floor. The spectators' area was closed off by a railing, beyond which the lawyer and litigant sat. A second railing separated this intermediate zone from the jurors and clerk, who sat facing the litigants. Above the jurors, seated on cushions at the head of the room, was a group of from four to two dozen justices. Surprisingly often, the justices' bench seems to have been arranged in an arc or semicircle reminiscent of the seating formation used by the speaker of the House or the governor in the General Court at the Williamsburg Capitol. The center of this dramatic arrangement was the chief magistrate, seated on a more elevated bench or arm chair, often with a triangular pediment or canopy signaling his superior station. As an invocation of royal authority, royal arms hung above the chief magistrate. Finally, access to the justices' bench and jury was guarded by sheriff's and cryer's boxes. The image of the magistrate passing judgment from the apse was a powerful one, both for those who pleaded their cases before the court and for the justices themselves (fig. 3).

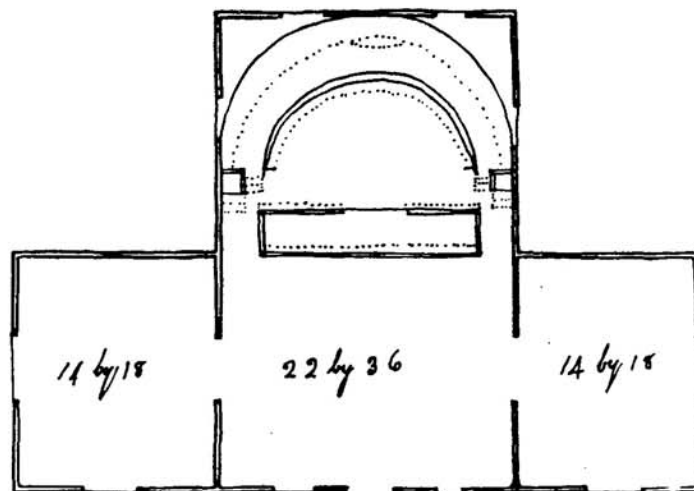


Fig. 3. Courthouse plan from 1781-1791 Amelia County deed book. Copied by D. R. Taylor.

At Westover, the later William Byrds created a domestic architectural setting with more than latent references to judicial strength. Somewhat like the formidable courtyard arrangement at Shirley, the main house was framed by a series of smaller subsidiary buildings, in this case extending in lines to each side. The principal elevation faced the James River, but formal approach seems to have been from the land side, through an elaborate screen with an iron gateway decorated with birds and the initials W B. When Thomas Lee Shippen visited Westover in 1783, rows of trees extended in arcs toward the river and the ends of the screen, placing the house at the center, as it were, of two natural apses (fig. 4). Where the ends of the land side apse met the screen were two elevated brick buildings, both of which survive. Of these, the east building is the more interesting for our purposes. It is a privy with a most remarkable interior arrangement. Entering the privy from a dramatically high set of steps, one passes between two rows of seats. Those to the left flank a fireplace, and they are small and low, presumably for children. On the opposite wall a brick apse has been constructed inside the square walls, forming the backdrop for a semicircular seat that faces the fireplace. The seat is pierced by three

holes—those at the sides are of medium size and that at the center is slightly larger (fig. 5).

This extraordinary seating arrangement parallels in a most private realm the hierarchial system of contemporary Virginia courtrooms. Perhaps we should avoid a too elaborate interpretation of the conceit of the Chesapeake's loftiest gentry. Yet the example helps us to see that architectural elements were used to reinforce the structure of domestic relationships as well as public functions. One of the William Byrds was especially imaginative in his pursuit of private order.

Lofty or otherwise, social and economic hierarchies sharply informed the finish and size of eighteenth-century buildings. Drawing inspiration from both the stylistic observations of connoisseurship and anthropology's analytical approach to form, we can begin to understand that there is important cultural meaning to be found by paying attention to the relationship between shape and embellishment. We can see what choices were made, where value was placed, how people of different ranks occupied and moved through their spaces. Ultimately, we can develop a better notion of how our eighteenth-century predecessors ordered their world.

#### Recommended Reading

- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. London, 1972.  
 John Fowler and John Cornforth. *English Decoration in the 18th Century*. Princeton, 1974.  
 Mark Girouard. *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*. New Haven, 1978.  
 Henry Glassie. *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts*. Knoxville, 1975.  
 Wallace B. Gusler. *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia*. Richmond, 1979.  
 Rhys Isaac. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill, 1982.  
 William H. Pierson. *American Buildings and their*

- Architects*. Vol 1: *The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles*. Garden City, N.Y., 1976.  
 Robert F. Trent. *Hearts and Crowns: Folk Chairs of the Connecticut Coast, 1720-1840*. New Haven, 1977.  
 Dell Upton. *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia*. New York, 1986

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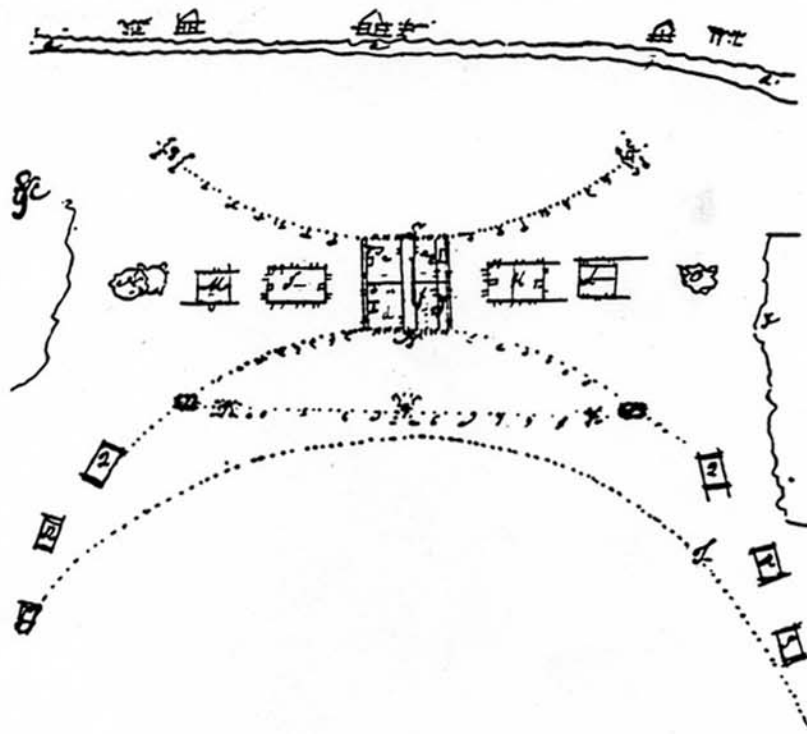


Fig. 4. Site plan of Westover, Charles City County, by Thomas Lee Shippen, 1783.

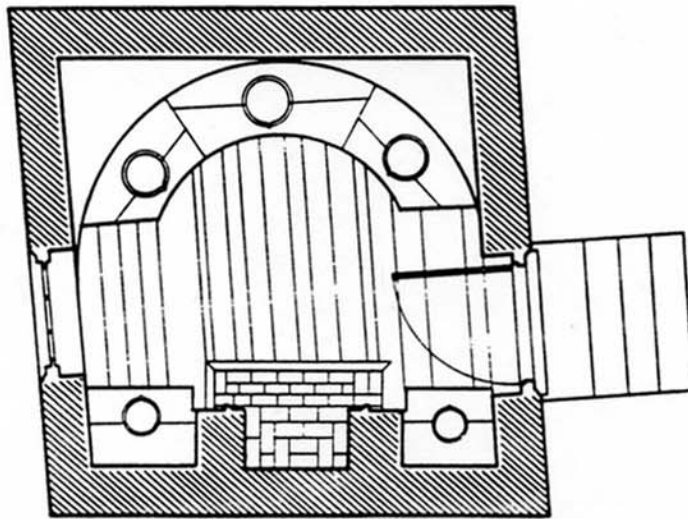


Fig. 5. Eighteenth-century privy at Westover. The seats to the south are set inside a plastered masonry apse that rises three feet above the floor. Drawing: J. J. Bernard and D. R. Taylor.