



Figure 1. Monticello plantation house and service wings. Image: Monticello Foundation. Figure 2. Menokin Glass House project. Image: Machado and Silvetti.

Dismantling Symbolic Violence

The Critical Conservation of Plantation Architecture

NATALIA ESCOBAR CASTRILLON

Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism
Carleton University

Keywords: critical conservation, systemic racism, architectural heritage, conflictive places.

This paper reflects on the role of architects in addressing contemporary debates on anti-racist heritage conservation approaches. For this purpose, this study will discuss the conservation projects of two crucial plantation sites in the racial history of the United States: the influential Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Plantation (1772) in Virginia and the recent glass house project designed by Machado and Silvetti for the Menokin Plantation in Virginia (under construction). At Monticello, architectural conservation efforts were focused on preserving Jefferson's house and ancillary buildings being faithful to the original decisions and intentions of the architect despite of the fact that this architecture was designed to segregate races, classes, and genders in space. In this approach, architecture is treated as an immutable container in which other arts, programs, or modes of expressions are responsible for presenting history critically. In contrast, the house at the Menokin plantation was a ruin when in 2011 Machado and Silvetti received the commission to restore it. Whereas it would have been technically possible to pursue a faithful reconstruction, the architects opted for a critical reframing of the architectural experience designing a new encounter that challenges previous spatial hierarchies based on racial segregation.

PERPETUATING WHITE SUPREMACY: THE RESTORATION OF MONTICELLO

The Monticello plantation (1768--) in Virginia was a refined machine for social segregation during the time in which slavery was a formal institution in the United States. Signer of the Declaration of Independence (1776) and third President Thomas Jefferson (1743--1826) was also both an enslaver and an architect whose designs, among them, remarkably the Monticello

plantation, systematically segregated black from white populations—and frequently women from men—into two separate worlds that constructed and reproduced racialized and gendered subjects.

Throughout the site, the black enslaved population inhabited scattered quarters, out of sight of the hilltop where the white family resided. Within this residence, domestic enslaved population inhabited a sunken ground floor surveyed by white women who were required to manage the house.¹ This space was hidden from public life and was connected to the first floors through two stairs landing in private corridors. This feature, along with the dumbwaiters² of the dining and tearoom, reduced the physical and visual presence of black population and women doing the house shores. Finally, the path around the hill and the dome of the house provided a privileged gaze over the landscape and the fields, whereas the core of the plantation, the industrial hub of Mulberry Row, where most enslaved population work, was hidden behind a wall, a feature that also reappears in Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia.

When in 1923 the private and non-profit Thomas Jefferson Foundation³ bought 2600 acres of the original 5000-acre Monticello plantation site, a complex and ongoing task of historical interpretation began. The Foundation formed a committee of white people only named the Restoration Task Force⁴ whose purpose was "returning the house and grounds to their appearance during Jefferson's residence."⁵ In a 1988 report, the conservation committee affirmed, "a strong commitment to the greatest possible historical accuracy" and a "continuing attempt to provide the visitor with as full a representation as possible of Jefferson's residence."⁶ In 1995, the committee specified that "the restoration program, therefore, seeks to preserve and portray Monticello as Jefferson knew it, with particular emphasis on the years of his retirement from 1809."⁷



Figure 3. The Monticello Plantation. Image: Thomas Jefferson Foundation.

The ongoing efforts to restore the site to the original intentions of Jefferson raise a crucial question: Are buildings and landscapes divested of ideological content even when they acted as refined machines for racial segregation? Should buildings and landscapes associated with an explicit and radical history of racial oppression be preserved “as they were”? On the one hand, the demolition of these architectures would prevent society from the important possibility of establishing a historical dialogue and critique. On the other hand, without an architectural intervention that condemns and provides a critical framework for the exclusionist ideology behind Jefferson’s design, white supremacy reproduces itself through conservation choices that reassert his authority and world view.

To perpetuate white supremacy, the emphasis of the Restoration committee on historical accuracy attempted to present ideological decisions as scientific facts. However, despite their stated intention to restore the site to the 1809 version, the conservation project constructs an idealized version of Jefferson’s life, characterized by fundamental omissions in its social and spatial narrative. The committee mainly focuses on the conservation of Jefferson’s monumental residence, and within it only of the floors previously occupied by the

white family. This idealized and exclusionist version of the past does not address the spaces that the enslaved population inhabited or the spaces and practices that reflect their self-determination. In this selective erasure, the committee also removed all alterations implemented by the Levy family who owned the house after Jefferson for a longer period than the former president.⁸ These decisions produce a fictional and biased reconstruction far from any rigorous restoration of the past.

The omissions were not limited to the house. The landscape conservation project consisted of rebuilding the terraces that flanked the residence, and on constructing a picturesque rural landscape, so that “the visitors have the opportunity to view a landscape largely as Jefferson saw it.”⁹ Paradoxically, the project included neither the restoration of the plantation landscape, with the fields and quarters where Jefferson enslaved around 600 men, women, and children during his lifetime, nor did it include the restoration of the landscape previously occupied by indigenous populations who were displaced from their land when the plantation was established. These decisions raise questions about how white hegemonic social groups have historically determine what constitutes historical truth and rigor, what is particularly visible in the conservation field.

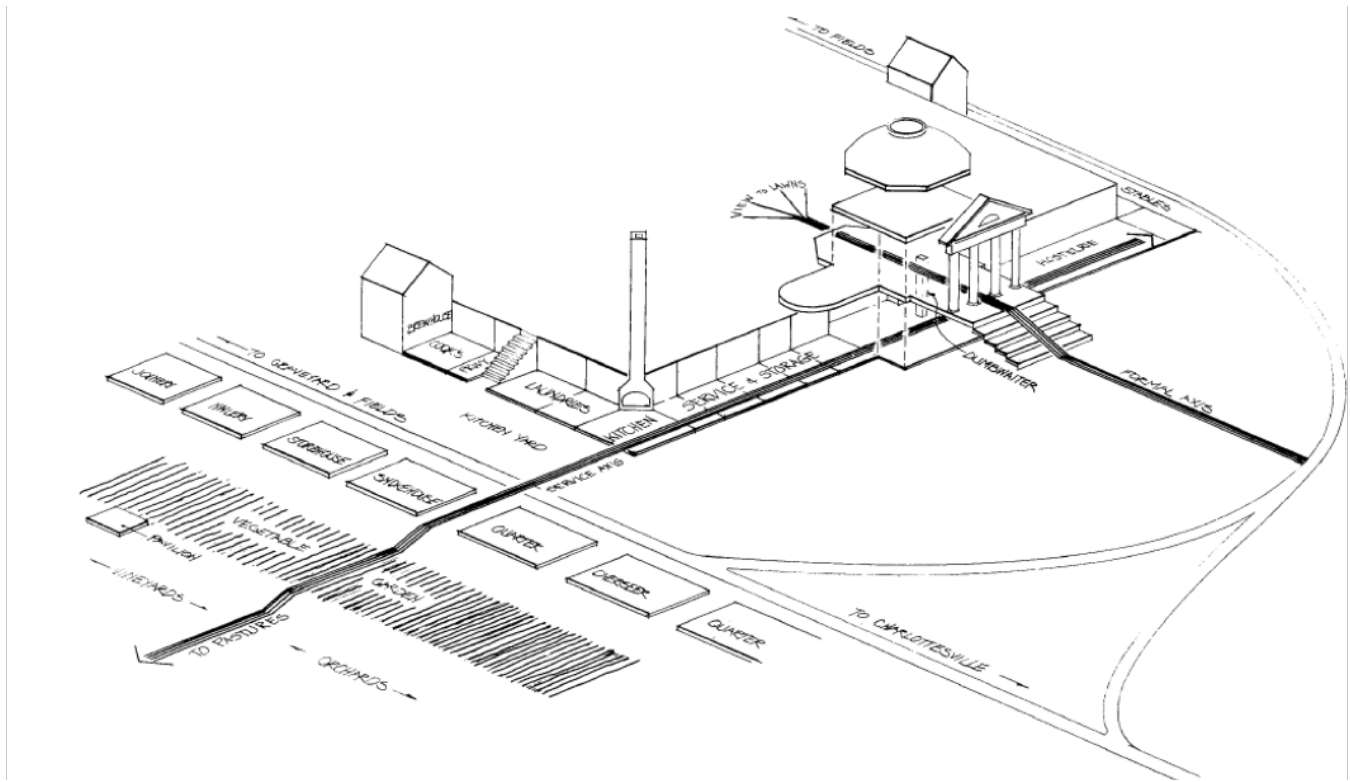


Figure 4. Monticello's basement and main floor. Image: Alice Gray Read, "Monticello's Dumbwaiters," JAE, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1995.

The attempts to tell a more comprehensive history that addresses slavery and the African Americans inhabiting the site relied on exhibitions and visitors tours only. Paradoxically, visitors could choose to exclude these tours from their visit to Monticello, since the Foundation offered separate tours focused exclusively on the Eurocentric, neoclassical aesthetic qualities of the house and gardens, as if architectural and aesthetic decisions could be separated from their sociopolitical associations.

It was not until 2015 that the foundation pursued the restoration of the spaces previously occupied by black enslaved population to convey a more complex and anti-racist history through an embodied architectural experience. In 2018, the nursery, the kitchen, and the room of the black enslaved Sally Hemings were restored. The reconstructions of Hemings' room focused on presenting different dimensions of her personality not reduced to her condition as enslaved or to her asymmetrical intimate relationship with Jefferson. Descendant of Hemings and participant in the room's exhibitions Gayle Jessup White explains that "it's not a recreation of what her room would've looked like at the time, but rather, a presentation of Sally Hemings as a fully-dimensional human being: a mother, a sister, a daughter, a world traveler."¹⁰ This project rejects previous pseudo-scientific discourses,

and presents a more critical and anti-racist approach to conservation, however, the architecture is treated as a mere backdrop unable to join the conservation.

The committee's philosophy represents a widespread conservation approach that relies on guided interpretation, exhibitions, and restorations to convey a critical view of history. The possibilities of contemporary architecture to participate in this discussion is not explored at Monticello. This next session speculates on how architecture can offer a critique of white supremacy while preserving contested places for their potential to open historical dialogues. This reflection also addresses some of the architectural and spatial tools that could be used to articulate such a critique. I argue that the ongoing conservation project at the Menokin plantation presents an alternative in which the event of architecture—that is, its conception and experience—participates in articulating a critical architectural encounter for visitors.

A CRITICAL ENCOUNTER: THE REFRAMING OF MENOKIN

The Menokin plantation (1769–) in Virginia was yet another instance demonstrating how architecture and spatial organization supported the racial segregation

system in the United States. The 590-acre plantation was owned by Francis Lightfoot Lee (1734–1797) and Rebecca Tayloe (1752–1797). Similar to Jefferson, Lightfoot was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, in direct contradiction to his status as an enslaver of over 200 people between 1769 and 1865.

Although the drawings are unsigned, colonial-style carpenter William Buckland seems to have been involved in the design and construction of the buildings at Menokin. The house for the white family consisted of a two-storey Georgian building with an attic and a cellar, flanked by two service buildings one containing an office, and the other a kitchen and a laundry room. This configuration would have kept domestic enslaved population separate from the main spaces, although it was also common practice to avoid fires. The separation of the offices from the kitchen and laundry also suggests spatial segregation of the sexes. As in Monticello, the quarters and buildings related to tobacco production were located closer to the fields and out of sight of visitors.

The Menokin plantation was abandoned in 1940. When the Menokin Foundation bought the property in 1995 the house was a ruin and most ancillary buildings had disappeared. However, most of the original materials of

the house have survived, including original stones, brick, and mortar; queen posts and dragon beams; framing assemblages; and the interior woodwork. In addition, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) produced detailed drawings and photographs before the building collapsed, originals of which were discovered in 1964. In 2014, the Foundation commissioned the project to the architecture firm Machado and Silvetti.

Despite the existence of enough materials and documents to pursue a rigorous restoration project as for Monticello, the Menokin Executive Director Sam McKelvey advocated for what he calls a “dynamic preservation” approach. McKelvey explains the Foundation “seek adaptive, changing, and fluid preservation or interpretive approaches to form relevance by connecting the archaic and modern in emotional, often abstract ways.”¹¹ More flexible definitions of authenticity and the legal status of the building as a ruin may have influenced the Foundation to think beyond the common approaches and restrictions of conservation agencies. In contrast, the philosophy of the Foundation emphasizes the presence of different layers of history to conceive architecture as an evolving process rather than a fixed object.

At the same time, the Foundation commission focused

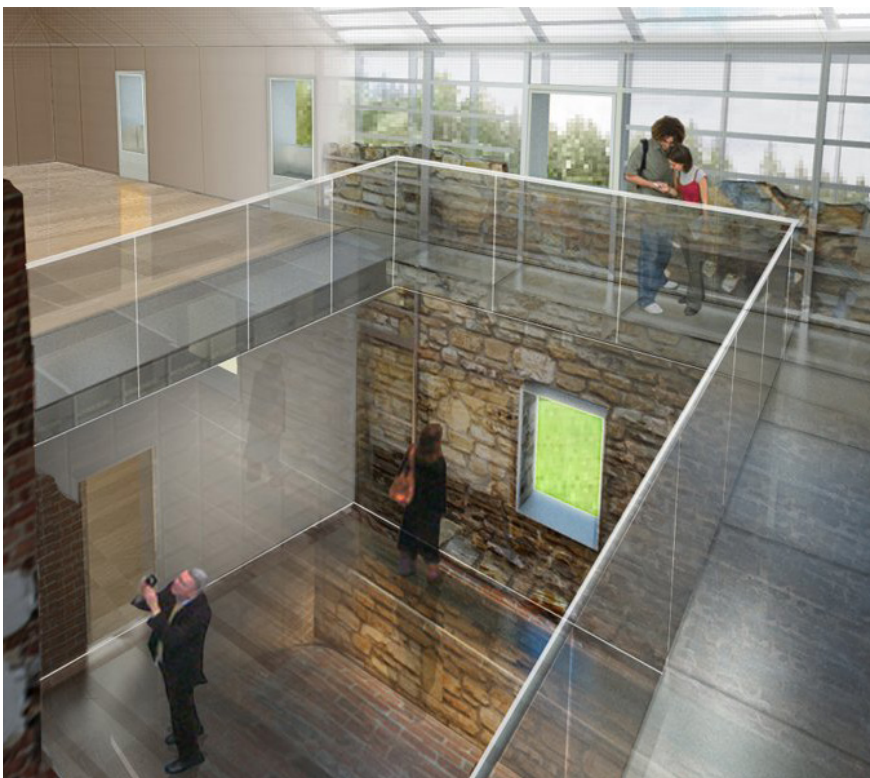


Figure 5. Menokin Glass House project. Images: Machado and Silvetti

uniquely on restoring the house of the white family, excluding the flanking buildings inhabited by the black enslaved population, or any building related to the plantation production. On the other hand, the Foundation acknowledges the displacement of Algonquin indigenous populations from the Rappahannock Creek and placed a conservation easement on 325 acres of the current land to protect their cultural landscape.

However, the proposal of Machado and Silveti differs from the intention of the Director to show all possible historical layers. Rather, I argue that the project entails a process of detailed selection and reframing of architectural experiences that produces a critical and embodied encounter with the object that is uncommon in the architectural conservation field. A crucial feature of the project is the use of structural glass as an exterior enclosure that will stand in place of the collapsed stone and brick walls encasing the remnants inside. Indoors, structural glass is used to construct transparency among the three floors and the basement.

As we have seen in Monticello and Menokin, historically, plantations houses were devices for exerting control in which restricted views, limited access, and visual surveillance played a fundamental role in constructing subjectivities, and race in particular. From the house's height, terraces, and windows, landowners could oversee enslaved people working in the fields. The white gaze shaped black subjects, producing what historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois described as a double consciousness or a tension between internal and external definitions of the black self. As if confronting this gaze, Machado and Silveti's glass wall allows for looking into the building. The historically unidirectional white gaze is countered by a contemporary gaze into the privacy and intimacy of the white domestic space, symbolically reversing a power dynamic deeply embedded in this architecture and landscape.

Similarly, the traditional floor divisions in plantation houses constructed and reinforced race and gender divisions. White females usually reside in the upper floors following the patriarchal concept of protection and privacy that kept them distanced from public affairs and focused on domestic life. At the same time, the basement was usually a place inhabited or used by the domestic enslaved population, which mostly consisted of black females visited by white females in charge of managing the house shores. Machado and Silveti's use of glass floors and glass catwalks allow for visual connections among all levels, clearly challenging the spatial hierarchy

of this historic typology. The first floor of white public life becomes a vulnerable space, surveilled from above and below, the project enables new modes of looking that challenge previous hierarchies.

Feminist, anti-racist scholar, and social activist bell hooks explains the relevance of sight in the sociocultural and physical context of plantations, where white enslavers would punish enslaved people regularly simply for looking at them. She proposes the term "Oppositional gaze"¹² as a type of looking relationship that involves the political rebellion and resistance against the repression of a black person's right to look. The oppositional gaze encompasses modes of looking that employ reflexive gazes such as the shared gaze, the repressed gaze, or the interrogating gaze.¹³ Machado and Silveti's proposal constructs a material equivalent of the oppositional gaze in architecture.

Visual relationships are also crucial in the project addressing the quarters inhabited by the black enslaved population at Menokin. In 2018, architect Reid Freeman's "Remembrance Structure" project was completed. A pavilion was erected over the archeological footprint of an 18th century dwelling of enslaved people that consisted of a wood frame wrapped in agricultural fabric. Sourced by solar lighting, the pavilion glows at night. I argue that this gesture emphasizes the presence of enslaved' population dwellings that were historically placed out of sight, hidden behind walls and slopes. However, in contrast to the transparent glass of the white family residence, the translucent fabric partially resists the intrusive gaze of visitors.

CONCLUSIONS

The conservation approaches at Monticello and Menokin offer a repertoire of possibilities when dealing with conflicting narratives of places that can inform future conservation projects. The present approach of the Monticello Foundation embraces the presence of different voices by restoring spaces relevant for the white and black population that inhabited the site and their descendants. The coexistence of contrasting narratives in different spaces promotes the critical reflection of visitors; however, the order of the architecture and landscape of white supremacy remains unchallenged for most of the embodied architectural experience. The task of the conservation architects is limited to restoring a past time, either with an emphasis on the contributions of white or black populations. Without the complementary information of tour guides and information boards, the

spaces of the white family may be consumed as a mere aesthetic experience.

The approach of the Menokin Foundation offers a critique of the power hierarchies that is embedded in the architecture. The architects deconstruct and modify the architectural features that characterized the historic plantation house typology such as the compartmentalization of floors and the opacity of the facade. Scholar and activist bell hooks affirms that it is necessary to disrupt and subvert “the idea of artistic endeavor and creative expression as politically neutral acts, the idea of art as a site for transcendence, and of arts as emerging from unfettered free zone of the imagination.”¹⁴ As if following this vision, Machado and Silveti’s design makes previous spatial divisions impossible in a metaphorical and physical sense. The new spatial project suggests a distance from and a rejection of previous values by enabling new visual connections. The focus of the project is the questioning of the exclusionist spatial features of the white family’s residence. In this project, the restoration of the historic house provides a framework for its critical reappraisal rather than its passive consumption.

However, the politics of architecture involves more than the object, its experience, and associated meanings. White

supremacy continues to reproduce itself in the racial composition of conservation committees, patrons and biased sources of funding of projects, inherited property ownership, the selection of white architects for new projects—including at Menokin—and the racist narratives of heritage nominations among other aspects. In addition, the decision to preserve the discussed plantations was initially promoted by the social circles around the white families, who had previously accumulated wealth from the system of slavery. Although both projects involved members of local communities and descendants in their current committees, conservation debates should be led by African American descendants, since these sites represent a historic period that needs to be revisited and rewritten in the present by those who have been silenced.

The critical conservation of the architectural experience is one more element in a complex web of social, cultural, and economic relationships, however, one that has great potential to influence and raise awareness on thousands of visitors a year. Therefore, we should continue to imagine new ways in which architectural conservation can be led by different voices and engage in wider sociopolitical debates and audiences through its potential to provide a subversive architectural encounter.



ENDNOTES

1 As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins states, subjects can be either oppressors or oppressed depending on the context. In the current system, white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 221–238.

2 Reinhold Martin, "Drawing the Color Line," in *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, Eds. Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, Mabel O. Wilson, (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), pp.68–69; And Alice Gray Read, "Monticello's Dumbwaiters," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Feb. 1995), pp. 168–175.

3 Monticello is owned and operated by the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., which was founded in 1923. As a private, non-profit 501(c)3 corporation, the Foundation receives no ongoing federal, state, or local funding in support of its dual mission of preservation and education.

4 Monticello Restoration Task Force consisted of white experts on Jefferson's history: William L. Beiswinger (Chairman), Peter J. Hatch, H. Andrew Johnson, William M. Kelso, Lucia C. Stanton, and Susan R. Stein.

5 From historical section of an "in-house" document, collected from Monticello restorationists, entitled, "Restoration," and dated July 29, 1988. It was signed by the Restoration Task Force (William L. Beiswinger [Chairman], Peter J. Hatch, H. Andrew Johnson, William M. Kelso, Lucia C. Stanton, and Susan R. Stein, in James L. Nolan Jr. and Ty F. Buckman, "Preserving the Postmodern, Restoring the Past: The Cases of Monticello and Montpelier," *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Spring, 1998), p. 255. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4121583>.

6 *Ibid.*, p.255.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 257. Between 1833 and 1923, the Levy family occupied the house for a period longer than Jefferson's himself. They implemented changes that were removed by the committee, such as the division of rooms, the addition of dormers, or the alteration of skylights.

9 "Monticello and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville" *UNESCO*. Date published unknown. Accessed on April 15th, 2021. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/442/>

10 "Jefferson's Monticello Makes Room For Sally Hemings," *NPR*. Published on June 17, 2018. Accessed on April 15th, 2021. <https://www.wprl.org/post/jeffersons-monticello-makes-room-sally-hemings>

11 Sam McKelvey "What is Dynamic Preservation," interview by Jennifer Thomas, *Menokin Foundation*. Date published unknown. Accessed on April 15th, 2021. <https://www.menokin.org/digital-content/what-is-dynamic-preservation>

12 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 115–132.

13 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *The Female and Visual Cultural Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 94–105.

14 bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, (New York: The New York Press, 1995), p.146.

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Citation: Escobar, N. "Dismantling Symbolic Violence: The Critical Conservation of Plantation Architecture." RAIC-CCUSA Summit 2021 Conference Proceedings, 2022, 98-105. <https://raic.org/academicsummit2021>