

A First Time Conference Experience: SESAH 2017

by Katie McCarthy Watts, University of Virginia

SESAH 2017 in Lynchburg, Virginia was my first time attending the conference for the Southeast Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians. I was pleased that it was in Virginia and so many students and alumni could attend. There were 147 registered attendees. I arrived at the conference on Thursday afternoon, in time for session 2 to start. I attended the “Architectural Precedent and Practice” session, chaired by Clifton Ellis, and was pleasantly surprised when the papers had more connections between them than insinuated by their individual titles. Presenters included Henry Hull, Fred Esenwein, Robert M. Craig, and Theodore Sawruk, on topics ranging widely from Viollet-le-Duc’s Restoration at Saint Sernin, France to Ithiel Town’s houses in rural Connecticut.

During session 3, I attended the “Heritage Tourism” session, chaired by David Bergstone from Old Salem, which unfortunately had multiple people drop out of the session due to unforeseen circumstances. The two remaining speakers, Laura C. Jenkins and Rebecca Crew, persevered and spoke about unique and stimulating topics: Gilded Age historic house bathrooms in Newport, Rhode Island and the Wellesley Club’s Modern home tours in Baltimore, Maryland. While there was less of a coherent theme in this session, the topics were quite interesting and the speakers both had a passion for their subjects.

On Thursday evening, we were given a tour of the Academy Center of the Arts just across the street from the conference hotel. The Academy Theater is currently undergoing a multimillion dollar restoration and the lead architect was onsite to give the tour. The theater was an incredibly tall space, while the seating area was not as deep as in a typical theater. The doors opposite the stage open directly onto Main Street, with a separate entrance lobby in the building next door. The painstaking work of restoration was well underway, and the theater will certainly be a gem for downtown Lynchburg once complete. Travis McDonald delivered the plenary address and introduction to Poplar Forest on Thursday evening as well. While I have been to Poplar



SESAH tour of the Academy Theater restoration, downtown Lynchburg

Forest twice before, including a private tour with McDonald, I still learned new information about Jefferson's design, the history of the site, and the ongoing restoration of the larger cultural landscape.

On Friday morning, I attended the session, "From Jefferson to Kimball: Shaping the Architecture of Virginia" chaired by Richard Guy Wilson. The speakers included Linda Binsted on brick Palladian architecture, Marie Frank on Fiske Kimball, and Peter Giscombe on the Old Farmer's Market in Petersburg, Virginia. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I was presenting in two sessions for the remainder of the day, so I did not get to explore any other topics. The business meeting was informative, not knowing much about the operations of SESA before attending the conference. Throughout the conference, and including the business lunch, the food and coffee were plentiful and a much-appreciated break between paper sessions. Danielle Wilkins gave a lovely presentation during the meeting with incredible photos of her year as an SAH H. Allen Brooks Travelling Fellow.

The conference ended on a high note with a tour, reception, and dinner at Poplar Forest. It was wonderful to see Poplar Forest in the evening. As the sun was setting, and the light was changing, the rooms came alive in new ways. The marbling of the wood in the new walnut doors was especially amazing in the glow of the sunset. The staff at Poplar Forest were knowledgeable and friendly as we roamed about on self-guided tours. As with any restoration project, it is a delight to return and see what has been accomplished in your absence. The reception and dinner provided time to see old friends and make new ones. I look forward to attending future SESA conferences!

October 25, 2017

Field Trip to Charlottesville by Dr. Kenneth Hafertepe, Baylor University

The SESA field trip to Charlottesville was packed with wonderful things to see. In addition to our intrepid leader, Clifton Ellis, we got to spend quality time with Richard Guy Wilson at the University of Virginia and Gardiner Hallock at Monticello.

Richard Guy Wilson presented a knowing narrative of the creation of the University of Virginia, and showed us all around the Lawn. It was a busy day at the University, as we found ourselves dodging a large wedding party, at the chapel, on the steps of the Rotunda, and in Pavilion VII. As a longtime UVA faculty member and as a leading Jefferson scholar, he was the perfect host for our group. We visited the interiors of Pavilions VII and VIII, the room of a very friendly student, and the upper gallery and terrace between two of the pavilions. Richard also showed us the one of the gardens that back up to the pavilions, and also the room thought to have been occupied by the two slaves of an early professor.



Richard Guy Wilson shows quarters of two slaves owned by a professor at the University of Virginia

For those of us who had been to Monticello before, there were many new features to examine: a new visitor center with an orientation theater, a café (the site of our lunch) a museum, and – wait for it – a large museum store. Even more changes awaited us on top of the mountain, including reconstructions of work spaces and quarters for enslaved workers at Mulberry Row and a restoration-in-progress at the early stone building that housed Monticello carpenters.

We were lucky to meet with Gardiner Hallock, director of restoration at Monticello. Gardiner showed us two restorations under way in the south wing. He took us into the original kitchen underneath the South Pavilion, showing us the older 1770s level, with evidence of a hearth, stew kettle, and built-in dresser, as well as the much higher 1806 kitchen. He also showed the room of Sally Hemmings, and discussed plans for expanded



Monticello - the dome room looking toward the small room in the portico

interpretation of Sally's life in this space. Finally, he took us to the South Terrace, where he discussed the replacement of the 1939 Chinese Chippendale railings with simpler picket or paling railings which are visible in an early watercolor.

Following our visit with Gardiner we embarked on the house tour. Perhaps most striking was the precision with which large groups of visitors are moved through the house. Our skilled guide led us through each of the first floor rooms, culminating in the dining room, newly painted in eye-popping chromium yellow. At the end of the official tour, we got a special treat, arranged by Gardiner: a trip to the dome room. This remarkable space was little-used by Jefferson, but opens into a space behind the west pediment that became a favorite space of his granddaughters.

This was followed by free time, which seemed generous when we started; it quickly became clear that we could have spent much more time on the slavery and garden tours, in the museum, and in the theater, not to mention the museum store! The group boarded the bus back to Lynchburg tired but delighted by our Charlottesville experience.