OPENING REMARKS

ARCHITECTURE AND IMPROVEMENT IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

SESSION

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Instigated by spiritual awakenings and nurtured by political optimism in the early nineteenth century, the concept of "improvement" was based on the belief that virtually every aspect of American life could be perfected through citizen will and action. Proponents applied characteristic industriousness to the task, proclaiming that improvement was not just an <u>option</u>, but in fact an <u>obligation</u>. In his book, *The Improvement of the Mind,* theologian-philosopher Isaac Watts expressed his belief that every person had a "necessary duty" to improve his understanding, judgment and useful knowledge to better contribute to social welfare. Watts explained that spurning this responsibility would "dishonor the God that made us reasonable creatures . . . [make us] injurious to our neighbors, kindred or friends; and . . . bring sin and misery upon ourselves."[1] Written in the eighteenth century, Watts' views enjoyed currency in early nineteenth-century America, where his book was republished in Boston in 1833. Three years later, a Philadelphia press issued similar ideas in the publication, *On the Mental Illumination and Moral Improvement of Mankind,* which encouraged contemporaries to exercise their superior intelligence and "moral action" in such activities as:

> improving the soil, adorning the landscape, promoting the progress of the useful arts, enlarging the boundaries of science, diffusing the blessings of Christianity over the globe, giving an impulse to every philanthropic movement, [and] counteracting the spirit of war, ambition, and licentiousness.[2]

A weighty obligation as well as a soaring ambition, improvement was a means of encouraging individual progress in education, spirituality, and social service. As its ideals spread through the nation, improvement colored the public life of Americans, especially in cities that had grown rapidly between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. Improvement encouraged individuals and

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[1] Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind* (Boston: James Loring, 1833), 18.

[2] Thomas Dick, LL.D. *On the Mental Illumination and Moral Improvement of Mankind* (Philadelphia: Key & Biddle, 1836), 18-19.

institutions to address social ills through new programs that oftentimes had an architectural component.

The notion of improvement was pursued through two main manifestations. First, improvement might describe a process by which things and people were made more efficient or valuable, especially in the civic sphere: like broader educational opportunities, systems to increase public health, and initiatives to serve the deaf, blind, or mentally ill. Second, improvement might be the thing that effected, or housed, the efforts to enhance public life, oftentimes with tools or structures, the latter giving architectural shape to such social improvements as schools, libraries, waterworks, hospitals and asylums.

Architecture could embrace both aspects of improvement, serving the new activities in a form deemed suitable to the function and oftentimes as indicative of the high aspirations housed within the building. Given the era's preferences for architecture informed by historical sources, antebellum architects chose forms that would communicate the intention of improvement in architectural designs that might enhance the public welfare through historical associations and simple beauty.

Both manifestations are portrayed in the University of Virginia, the original campus and program of which was directed, of course, by Thomas Jefferson. With his famous Academical Village, Jefferson created one of the country's great environments of improvement: its architectural design was based on approved examples of ancient and modern architecture that would reform unfortunate and ungainly building practices common in America, while its planning encapsulated Jefferson's innovations in collegiate studies and enhanced the important relationships shared between faculty and students. Thus the improved architecture was a framework that served Jefferson's belief that the human condition is, as he wrote, "susceptible of much improvement . . . and the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected."[3] Jefferson sought to "diffuse" knowledge through the activities pursued by students in the buildings, and through the very design of the buildings themselves.

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[3] Jefferson to Monsieur Dupont de Nemours, April 24, 1816; quoted in James E. Palombo, *Reflections Amid the American Experiment* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009): 200.

Jefferson provides a convenient introductory case study for the subject of improvement not only as an exemplar of antebellum architecture but also because, by happy coincidence, today is his 270th birthday. Just as Jefferson's ideals, which he articulated in words and buildings, describe the goals of the period and frame our discussion today, they also inspired the person who, perhaps, best articulated the meaning of improvement to antebellum generations. In a speech presented on June 17, 1825, at the inauguration of the monument in Boston that commemorates the Battle of Bunker Hill, Daniel Webster reflected on the half-century that had passed since that conflict. He understood his time to be an "extraordinary age" that reaped the benefits of the Revolution. The steady growth of the country and concurrent "progress of knowledge" was to credit for improvements in all areas of American life, and above all, "the general spirit of the age" toward continual advancement. Webster believed that "volumes" could be filled with descriptions of the "progress made during the last half-century in the polite and the mechanic arts, in machinery and manufactures, in commerce and agriculture, in letters and in science."

Rather than simply accept these benefits of the Revolutionary generation, Webster encouraged his listeners to follow the example of their forebears to strive for further improvement. He explained,

> The great trust now descends to new hands. Let us apply ourselves to that which is presented to us, as our appropriate object. . . . [T]here remains to us a great duty of defense and preservation; and there is opened to us, also, a noble pursuit, to which the spirit of the times strongly invites us. Our proper business is improvement. Let our age be the age of improvement.[4]

While Webster chronicled the achievements of the previous half-century, he also pointed to the work that remained to be accomplished. Although the country's development had been profound, it had not yet achieved the social perfection anticipated by many. In efforts to attain that "more perfect union," certain municipalities and individuals turned their attention to opportunities that would ameliorate unfortunate conditions among the citizenry. Philanthropic institutions were founded by government agency and private patronage. Architects of these new agencies addressed

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[4] Daniel Webster, "The Bunker Hill Monument," June 17, 1825. Printed in *The Great Orations and Senatorial Speech of Daniel Webster* (Rochester: William Hayward, 1853): 63-65.

the ideal of improvement through style, planning, and technology, as our four presenters will articulate presently.

Together their subjects span a half-century of architecture from Atlantic Coast cities to the new capital of Texas, and they characterize different motivations, processes, and results, but all of them enacted by builders striving for the common goal of improvement.

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