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Shaping the City

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At Mount Vernon, New Centers Offer Lessons in Harmony

By Roger K. Lewis, Columnist
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This has been a big week for George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens, the official name of that extraordinary property overlooking the Potomac River.

The newly built Ford Orientation Center and Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center, treated to front page coverage in Tuesday's Washington Post, opened to the public yesterday.

These new buildings contain sculptures, paintings, portraits, models, photos, films, documents and diverse artifacts, with succinct descriptions and pithy quotations describing the life, times and accomplishments of our nation's first president. Visitors are offered a well-organized, easily understood history lesson about 18th-century America and its founding father.



Ford Orientation Center

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At Mount Vernon, New Centers Offer Lessons in Harmony, continued.

But this isn't the first time Mount Vernon has offered edification. For more than 200 years, Mount Vernon has taught a particular architectural lesson: how a building, simple in form and function, can dominate its site while commanding spectacular views extending far beyond the site.

A week ago, touring the new orientation center and museum during a preview reception sponsored by the project architects, GWWO Inc. of Baltimore, I realized that Mount Vernon now offers additional design lessons.

First, in contrast to George Washington's mansion, the new architecture shows how buildings can defer to, rather than dominate, the landscape, merging with the land yet still achieving appropriate aesthetic character and presence, not to mention energy-conserving sustainability.

Second, the two new centers convincingly show that designing contextually harmonious, visually rich architecture does not depend on importing trendy aesthetic formulas or ideologies, nor on replicating historic architectural styles.



GWWO, in collaboration with the landscape architecture firm EDAW Inc., placed two-thirds of the complex's 66,700 square feet below a four-acre pasture next to the Mount Vernon Inn and main gate. Hogg Island sheep, like those Washington owned, are supposed to graze in the pasture atop the museum roof.



Framing the eastern edge of the sheep pasture, the partially buried orientation center is organized around an elliptically shaped exterior courtyard. Wrapping halfway around the intimate courtyard is a double-height glass-curtain wall with the center's capacious, split-level foyer behind. The curving, transparent facade creates a visual focal point for the above-grade, visible portion of the building.

Top: Views across a serene pasture greet visitors as they enter Mount Vernon through the main gate; Bottom: The Ford Orientation Center lobby wraps around an elliptical clearing, giving visitors a constant visual connection to the Mount Vernon landscape.

Able to accommodate large crowds, the grand foyer provides access at its southern end to a pair of auditoriums pushed down into the earth, as well as an at-grade exit lobby leading visitors out of the orientation center and around the pasture to the upper level of the museum entry pavilion.

At Mount Vernon, New Centers Offer Lessons in Harmony, continued.

The two-story entry pavilion necessarily erupts above the pasture and newly planted garden on the western edge of the complex. Inside the pavilion, visitors immediately descend to the museum's main floor, which is almost entirely underground. Here, all the exhibition spaces and theaters are below an exposed roof structure painted black.

The museum's only other externally visible element is a long, glazed corridor abutting the convex western perimeter of the museum and pasture. Facing the gardens, it forms the last leg of the orientation and museum circuit. With the story of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association told on its inner wall, this passage leads from the museum's entry foyer to the existing Mount Vernon Inn, where there are shopping and eating facilities, as well as the exit to the traffic circle.

This design strategy has yielded a choreographed yet logical journey. It clearly responds to the wishes of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, which sought to preserve the historic, pastoral setting near the mansion, as well as views of and from the mansion.

Although much of the complex is underground, the designers have managed to introduce light and exterior views. Especially effective are the high clerestory window bands wrapping around lobby walls in both the orientation center and museum. I looked up periodically to see the sky and sense the changing quality of light as sunset approached.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is the absence of 18th-century design motifs, neoclassical riffs or allusions to Colonial architecture. There are no Doric, Ionian or Corinthian columns or pilasters, no Greek- or Roman-inspired entablatures and pediments, no Palladian windows, no dentils or cornices, no arches or keystones.

These two buildings are decidedly modern. Both traditional and modern materials, assembled with consistently modern detailing, clad reinforced concrete and steel structural skeletons. The building facades are glass, metal and red brick, and interiors are finished with Spanish limestone, plaster, hardwood, monochromatic ceiling and wall fabrics, carpeting, and tile, all deployed appropriately.



Top: The entry pavilion for the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center features a light-filled lobby and grand stair that leads to the exhibits and theater experiences; Bottom: Visitors exit the Museum and Education Center through a serpentine corridor which leads to the Mount Vernon Inn.

At Mount Vernon, New Centers Offer Lessons in Harmony, continued.

This is not in-your-face modernism, not the modernism of bombast, exotic geometry or architectural hyperbole that so often competes with and detracts from what is on display. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and the design team wisely decided that these new buildings should be elegant and memorable but also aesthetically comfortable for both exhibits and people.

After years of planning, including consideration of alternative aesthetic languages, the designers found just the right tone. They struck a balance among the competing forces of client expectations, functional needs, site constraints and opportunities, historical and cultural context, and budget.

Those familiar with Mount Vernon have good reason to go back. Given the new design lessons to be learned, some visitors in particular should head there. Sponsors of the proposed Vietnam Veterans National Memorial visitors center should go to see why their proposal for an underground bunker to exist invisibly next to the Lincoln Memorial makes little sense. And anyone who believes traditional and modern design cannot coexist also should go take a good look.

