

POLITECNICO DI TORINO
SECOND SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE
Master of Science in Architecture
Honors theses

Thomas Jefferson architect and archaeologist.

The classical culture in the constituent process of the American national conscience through a founding father's work

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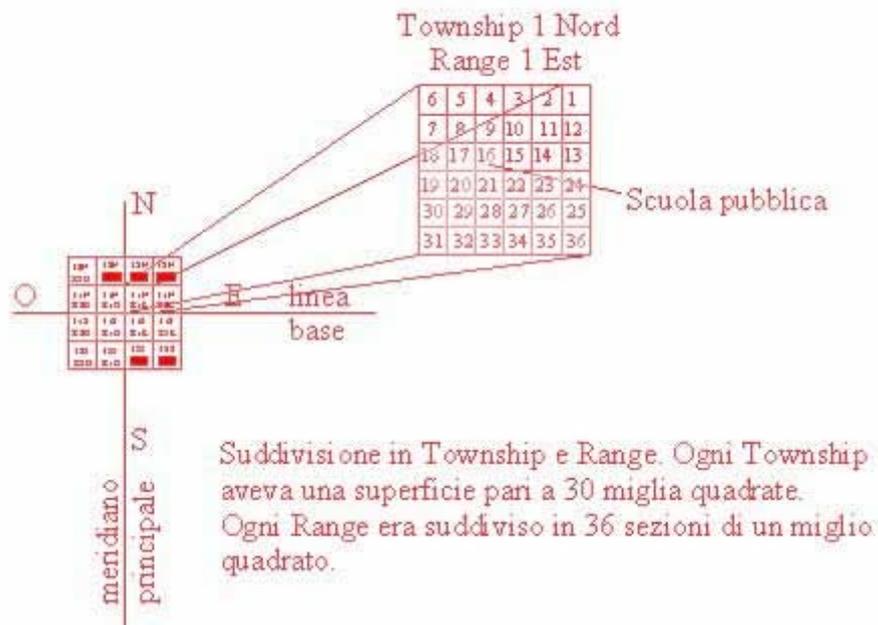
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The starting researches have been focused on Thomas Jefferson as an archaeologist. From this early analysis, a definitely complex figure came out, that in his lifetime, was involved in different cultural, architectural, and political areas. This approach led to a wide-ranging study, and the final work has been focused on a few issues concerning the cultural world on which the rising nation was based the day after the Declaration of Independence (4th July 1776). The founding fathers were sons of the European Enlightenment, and of the classical culture; on those principles they founded the constituent charter, and defined the young nation's cultural life. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), author of the Declaration of Independence, and 3rd president of the United States, was a leading exponent of this current of thought. His many interests, and studies, and his direct knowledge of the European world, acquired in his long stay in France as United States ambassador (1784-1789), helped to structure the principles of his political action, which affected schools of thought in architectural, urban, and native archaeology fields, as well as historical, and philosophical research.



Thanks to Jefferson's work, the figure of the professional architect came into being, in a social context in which the architecture was a prerogative of unskilled European workers, that adapted local materials to typologies, and techniques imported from their motherland.

A variegated catalogue of buildings and town plans were originated: even if referred to consolidated patterns, they were superficial in their project, and in their realization, and they didn't help the creation of a national model of reference. It was clear, in Jefferson's mind, that the nation, composed by citizens different for traditions, origins, and religions, needed an urban, and architectural image. A picture based on classical elements of reference, on those proposed by the Republican Rome, and revised by Palladio, as a unifying, and representative manifesto of American people. In the town planning field, he worked out the *checkerboard plan*; a scheme that come from the Hippodamus' grid -redefined by Vitruvius' theory- and from Hippocrates' guidelines. The jeffersonian principles referred to the salubrity of the place, to the location of the urban gridiron, and to the orthogonality of the road network. On a wider scale, the settlement of the new administrative regions followed the classical criteria, both in the toponymy and in the location of state lines, marked following a system of parallels and meridians.



Jefferson's commitment to the study of the culture, and the traditions of American Indians began a new season of direct analyses, and archaeological excavations on Indian settlements. He considered essential the constitution of a cultural heritage belonging to the land on which the American people settled down, in an attempt to appropriate that land past experiences, absorbing as own culture the past of a native civilization, that he left to the margins of the new American epic, though. In the archaeological field, Jefferson's work is mainly remembered for the method he used to accomplish the excavations of a mound. Through the analysis of the succession of the different strata, Jefferson identified a chronological sequence, using a scientific method that is now called *stratigraphy*, and anticipating its application of more than a century.



The Jeffersonian theories, and methods have had different success in their acquisition, and in their application. In the architectural field, thanks to Jefferson, a national architecture representative of the American essence rose through the building of the Capitol of Richmond, of Monticello, and Poplar Forest, and of the University of Virginia. In other fields, his theoretical and methodological conclusions were not entirely understood, and were resumed a century later in different geographical and academic situations.

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