

The plantation system and colonialism history essay



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It is said that “ Architecture is the reflection of the overall cultural representation of a particular region. With Architecture it is a personal and social idea that in addition to presenting itself expressively represents an approach towards life, a consciousness of responsibility”. (K. Eggener- pg 2)

In the 16th century at the height of the colonial era, Europeans began establishing settlement in the Americas, enslaving many Africans as both field workers and domestic servants. The type of slave you were determined the type of building you were allowed to inhabit, and the parts of the plantation you were allowed to use on a daily basis.

Many today recognise the immorality of the Europeans in the days of colonialism, but are not familiar with the strategic way the architecture on the plantations was used. This is not a thesis on slavery, but more of an understanding of how the architecture of the era was used as an enslavement devise. Enslavement in this thesis refers to the controlling and keeping of discipline among those who were enslaved. The Europeans were the masters of control and manipulation. They had many methods they used to achieve this stature, including master planning and design which seems to be overlooked. Very few literatures focus on the architecture entirely. The ones that do, convincingly speak of the architecture and the landscape as being used by the slaves towards their own endeavours. This was referred to as a “ subtle act of appropriation.” (J. M. Vlach- back page summery)

It is also written that the architecture of the era was no more purposeful than the clothes on the slaves' backs, as the plantation owner's only concern was production. The fact that the same literature spoke of the cost and difficulty

of purchasing and maintaining slaves due to the rapid decline and eventual abolishment of the slave trade, as well as the introduction of purpose-built quarters designated to slave health and welfare, gives rise to a new argument. This new argument allows one to understand the importance of the architecture of that time, to both the slaves and the colonial Europeans as both a means of control and also a means of overcoming control.

Various literature and relevant materials have been vigorously assessed to seek adequate evidence that support the fact that the design and planning of the architecture and the plantation layout were an important method of control and assertion of power by the colonial Europeans. Thus, focus is placed on the architecture and master planning of the colonial Europeans, how they and their plantation workers lived, and the makeup and every day running of the American colonial plantation under European rule.

The overall aim of this thesis is to provide a convincing conclusion that gives its readers a greater understanding of how architecture was used during colonial enslavement. Additionally, to highlight convincing evidence that supports the belief that architecture was not only used as shelter and visual representation of the era, but also played an important role in the colonial rule.

ONE

‘ The Plantation System ’

“ Colonialism is all about the exercise of power and its consequences.” (S. E Ramirez)

It is described as the act of a greater nation occupying another nation, usually one smaller than itself, with the intention and purpose of supplementing the demands of the greater nation. During this act, it was common practice for the greater nation to impose its views and laws upon the weaker nation which became its colony. The age of early modern European colonialism leading to enslavement began in the sixteenth century, when the Europeans who were known for trading embarked on the Americas to establish a new and innovative trading system that was structured around farming and obtaining rear commodities. The first English colony to own slaves in North America was the state of Virginia in 1619, and by the 18th century it then spread throughout the southern states of America including the state of Texas. By this time the Europeans understood that when you are introduced suddenly to a new region and a new way of living, one of the first and necessary things every living creature had to learn was the skill of adaptability. This is due to the fact that since nature does not change its rules or characteristics, one has to make changes according to the natural and geographical characteristics of that particular region. The Europeans recognised this difficulty but was driven by the world demand for rear produce, thus they began to explore methods for adapting to their new environment. This gave rise to a new system known as the Plantation System. The word ' Plantation' was not always used to describe the systematical layout of land that one now understands it to be. Today we think of it as a very large agricultural estate when in fact the name ' Plantation' started life simply referring to the act of planting any sort of crops or even a tree in one's back garden. It is documented that the word then evolved in meaning when the English conquered Ireland to describe a large

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portion of farm land or settlement in a new or inhabited territory. As the Europeans embarked on new lands with new challenges and colonialism became a way of life, the name ' Plantation' then further develop to describe more than just a large piece of farmland. It became a whole new system that was adaptable to their new environment.

The Plantation System was simple but yet affective. It was the division of the land into smaller units under private ownership. This system was created to fuel a colonial economy based on production at which it was very successful. However, its success was as a result of a major problem. One of the recognised problems with an economy driven by colonialism was the lopsidedness of the economic growth. The economy of the time was extremely high in export and almost none existent in terms of import. This drastically affected the early running of the plantation and had a detrimental effect on those who were workers, and may have added to the many disruptions among those who were slaves. The Plantation System in one's eye seemed to be a plan of multiple uses. It firstly gave an outline of a basic layout which each plantation owner can follow and adjust to their personal use. Although every plantation was different and reflected the individuality of each owner, there were always a few basic rules. The most important rule was the location, grandeur and dominance of the Plantation house (also none as the Main House) which would be the pinnacle building and the home of the owner. This act of dominance often meant that the plantation house had to be located on the highest point on the plantation and therefore dictated the overall layout of the grounds. Its majestic design had to be of a standard above all other buildings in the system; its upkeep would reflect the success

or the failure of the plantation. Another very important aspect was the size and the layout of the plantation. “ To mark their dominance over both nature and other men, planters acquired acreage, set out the boundaries of their holdings, had their fields cleared and selected building sites.” (J. M. Vlach - pg1)

The colonial plantation was more than just a farm, it was a home to all who were associated with it, it was a place of work, a place for sick workers, and a place where the owners can entertain their guests and live an affluent lifestyle. Its grounds had to be large enough to accommodate all these functions while keeping a high level of separation. The main house was usually close to the main entrance and would be the first sight for visitors. It was usually flanked on one of either side by an office or a guest apartment (also known as a garconnier). The domestic servants' quarters (house slaves) along with the quarters of the carriage drivers were situated in close proximity to the main house so they can be quickly called upon when needed. The land surrounding the plantation house would be of a high standard, designed using the finest grass and the most expensive landscaping work of the time. At the furthest point of the plantation, usually at the back end of the grounds were the fields. This is where the crops were grown and the majority of the plantation production took place. It was also where the slave quarters were strategically located within walking distance of the fields and far out of the sight of guests. This location was also a psychological act of imprisonment by the owners upon their slaves. It reminded those who were workers that their sole purpose in life was to work

the fields of the plantation, and their only means of escape was blocked by the size and dominance of the main house.

The plantation system was like a functional puzzle. Each piece had to be strategically located to see to the basic needs of all who were apart of the system, while synchronously maximizing the flow of production. The plantation grounds also acted as a means of keeping discipline among the slaves. The lands were usually fully surrounded by forestland and situated miles apart from each other and miles away from towns. The layout and location of the slave quarters meant that the slaves were often kept together at home or at work, under close watch by the overseers whose house usually overlooked the slave quarters and the farm area. The grounds were like a fortress to the majority of its workers as only a chosen few were allowed to leave at any given time. The coach drivers who drove the owner and his family, the messengers, and a few other slaves whose tasks involved venturing out to the local market. Everything the workers required was on the plantation. A military barracks comes to mind when thinking of this sort of layout, where the structure and lifestyle was steered around a main objective and everything else was of lesser importance. One can argue that the colonial plantation was no different to the layout of a barracks and the army housing we know today. Like the barracks the plantation was an organization in which the Architecture and layout was used to make it possible to control the use of an individual's time and space on a daily basis. Additionally, like the barracks discipline was an important factor on a plantation, as it was a general formula of dominance.

Another similarity that is still embedded in many methods of discipline today is the strict work regime used. This can still be witnessed in any work environment from the everyday office to the military. Field slaves were said to be worked from sun up to sun down and had to carry out as much work as possible during this time. Time management was of a high priority and workers had to be thoroughly drilled and disciplined to maximise the use of the available daylight. It is documented that many of the Plantation owners adopted a rigorous work ethic to achieve this. They created methods that allowed them to enhance control and discipline during work while at the same time fulfilling daily task to align with production demands. The most popular method was the use of a 'gang system'. This system was adaptable to any task and simply involved a group of workers who worked as a team and sometimes did the same task for a lengthy period of time, very similar to a chain gang or a military squadron. Then there were the piece workers such as the carpenters and the blacksmiths who were of an elite group. Like a sniper or a gunner in the army, they were groomed from an early age and their only task was to carry out works that met with their specialist skills. There was also the least popular 'task system'. This system depended on the type of production and commodity a particular Plantation specialised in. It involved several slaves individually carrying out basic task on their own, not dissimilar to the methods used in today's office or any work structure. This method was not commonly used due to the limitation in control as it is much easier for one or two overseers to watch over a group of workers working in one area than single individuals scattered across a terrain

As similar as they are, the differences between the military barracks and the Plantation System outweighs ten folds. Michel Foucault expressed it perfectly when he described the differences by stating that, “ they were different from slavery because they were not based on a relation of appropriation of bodies.” (M. Foucault - pg137)

The fundamental difference between the two is ownership. One may agree that most soldiers are volunteers who are victims of a special type of technique masterminded by the military structure. This was a structure that changed the mind-set of the soldiers by attacking the basic similarities between them and civilians. It attacked the way they talked, their deportment and their interaction with others. This is a sort of methodology that convinces each soldier to willingly do as they are told at all cost. The plantation system on the other hand used a different type of technique. A well worked technique which convinces a person who refuses to work to become very productive. This was based on force and ownership. The type of ownership similar to what parents would have over their children. As a slave you were seldom happy with your situation on the plantation, but you were taught that the plantation was your home, the people on the plantation were your family and the plantation owner was your master. Your ultimate goal was to please your family and your master. This system created a new type of society. Reinhold Martin refers to this type of society as “ the control” society, where a person is encourage with a new identity and able to boost his productivity. (R. Martin - pg5)

The Plantation system was created for the sole purpose of production.

Whoever lived and worked on the plantation was an important piece of a <https://assignbuster.com/the-plantation-system-and-colonialism-history-essay/>

highly successful production wheel. The layout, the science used, the level of control, all created a new society that everyone involved had to adapt to. This was a structure that the slaves hated and revoked but yet gave their all in terms of hard work to allow the system to prosper. I earlier drew a similarity to parenting, where as a child you had to do as your parents say or you would be punished. Even if you didn't want to do as your told, you would still do it to the best of your ability to please your parents. So would a slave to his master, as the plantation system had a way of converting each into a member of a plantation family, trapped in its system.

TWO

' The Architecture '

While constructing the homes for themselves and their slaves, the plantation owners who adopted the role of architects had to consider what type of architecture would best suit the plantation. By selecting the type of structures to be built, their locations and size, the owners were able to determine not only the look of the land around them but also how the architecture used may control and assist in discipline. The house slaves were said to live a better life and were housed in better accommodations than those who were field slaves. Even the locations of the slave houses were important. In fact, it is documented that in the earlier days of slavery some house slaves actually lived inside the plantation house. John Vlach wrote that; " Various kinds of documentary and archaeological evidence indicate that 17th century slaves either were quartered in their owners' houses or slept in the lofts of nearby kitchens and sheds" (J. M. Vlach - pg154)

This practice was later outlawed and the social status between all members of the plantation had to be greater emphasised. The architecture was instrumental in this social emphasis.

At the top of the social structure which was also used to implement a hierarchy of control was the plantation house. This house was the home of the Colonial master and his family. It was a place for entertaining his guests and a monument that set the tone of his lifestyle. This house by social law had to be of grandeur and built to the highest standard. Its dominance had to be appreciated from the four corners of the plantation for all to recognise who was in charge. Its location was documented to be at the highest point where its occupants had full vantage and a view of control over the entire plantation. The architecture of the plantation house was overly designed and purposely arranged with the intention of maintaining authority at all times. The layout and style of majority of the plantation houses was said to be inherited from 15th century stately homes that were common with the elites of Europe. The bold design which incorporated tall roman styled columns of the Composite order, the grand entrances, and high ceilings of the many rooms represented a social status that was as important to the owner as his wealth. The early designs of the European stately homes was said to have no corridors which would have been an issue in the plantation system. The early layout was understood to be a series of rooms that were connected to each other by other habitable rooms, which meant that one had to venture through one room to get to the other and privacy between owners and servants were minimal. The arrival of the colonial era and the introduction of African slaves into the plantation house as domestic servants meant that this

layout was no longer acceptable and the transition from stately home to plantation house had to involve a new design. Corridors were introduced to minimize traffic through important rooms, and the unnecessary interaction between slaves and the owners or his guests. After the introduction of laws that insisted on stringent separation between owners and their slaves, plantation houses were further adapted and their designs became a vessel of segregation. The level of segregation however, was based on the opinion of the individual owner of each plantation. In the earlier days of the plantation system before the introduction of the 17th century legislation, some house slaves (domestic workers) were allowed to live inside the plantation house in the attic room or more commonly on the ground floor among the service rooms. Although the law insisted that this was not acceptable, some plantations introduced no change, while others introduced various setups that obeyed the new law and maintained the level of service required. Robertson mansion in the state of Texas for example, had a service wing attached to the rear of the plantation house, which had all the rooms a house slave needed to carry out his work, and meant that the interaction between the classes were kept to a minimum. The placement of the service wing was mostly to the rear of the house as its design was kept to a low standard. The art of control and discipline plays upon disparagement. This denigration was reflected in the architecture and the quality of design the slaves were exposed to even during work. This meant that unlike the rest of the plantation house the service wing was minimal in design; in fact it is documented that the only rooms in the service wing to have a ceiling and designed to an acceptable standard was the dining room and the kitchen. A more common layout saw the service rooms completely

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separated from the plantation house into smaller structures that were in close proximity to the main house. Domestic slaves were then moved into the respective buildings so they can be much closer to where they work and be ready to give service at anytime. On Pond Spring plantation in the state of Alabama for example, the kitchen worker's room was in the same building as the kitchen, separated only by a small passage. Each plantation house was diverse in its own right but what was common was its status over all other buildings and its use as a symbol of control over the plantation and its workers.

Second in the plantation's structure of control was the house of the Overseer. This house was commonly located in a position where the Overseer had a full view of the quarters of the field slaves. Its design was of a standard higher than the slave quarters and built with a view of authority. The job of the overseer was as his title describe, he was task with overseeing the works and getting maximum production out of each worker by any means necessary. The social standing of the overseer was quite interesting to say the least. They found themselves in the middle of the pecking order of control on the plantation. They were very much inferior to the plantation owners due to class, but yet very superior over the slave due to race. In the early days of colonialism there were no overseers present on the plantation. Many plantation owners had fewer slaves and relied on the help of one or two of the said slaves that they promoted to ' slave drivers'. As the plantations got larger and required more slaves, the plantation owners were required to take an even more dominant role and the much despised overseer was introduced. The unpopularity of the overseers with both slaves

and owners was reflected both socially and spatially. Hermitage Plantation in the state of Georgia for example, represents a typical location of the overseer's house. It was conveniently located halfway between the owner's residence and the slave quarters, outlining the three point structure of control that was essential to the longevity of the plantation. Other plantations took a slightly different approach, and located the overseer's house amongst the office and the house of the resident teacher. In this location he was still in clear view of the slave quarters and it re-assured him of his managerial standing.

The architecture of the overseer's house developed over time, it is recorded that in the earlier days of their introduction the discourtesy shown towards them was reflected in the way they were housed. At one point slave and overseers houses were exactly the same and were only different in location. Some owners even force them to live in the same quarters as the slaves. The introduction of the segregation laws and the increase in their value, force the plantation owners to take a new approach towards the treatment of the overseers. They quickly recognise the importance of the overseer in the hierarchy of control and discipline on the plantation. Their living conditions were then improved, some were even given their own servants to highlight their worth and signal a new model of authority on the plantation. There were no set standard recorded for the design of the overseer's house. The way each lived reflected the mindset of the owner and his attitude towards them. The evidence clearly concedes that although they did not experience the same lifestyle as the owners, they were housed in better accommodation than the slaves. The overseer's house on Hampton Plantation in the state of

Maryland for example, was constructed to an acceptable standard. It is recorded as having several rooms including a loft space. Another house on Beacon Hall Plantation in the same state was said to be a more modest two room accommodation with a small porch. John Vlach in his research recorded a former resident of a third overseer's house in the state of Georgia who was describing its layout in detail. She stated that;

"...of our three apartments, one is our sitting, eating, and living room, and it is sixteen feet by fifteen. The walls are plastered indeed, but neither painted or papered; it is divided from our bedroom by a dingy wooden partition covered all over with hooks, pegs and nails.... The third room, a chamber with sloping ceiling, immediately over our sitting room and under the roof, is appropriated to the nurse and my two babies. Of the closets, one is Mr. O, the overseer's bedroom, the other his office or place of business; and the third adjoining our bedroom, and opening immediately out of doors, is Mr. Butler's dressing room and cabinet d'affaires". (J. M. Vlach - pg139)

Her description of the layout shows a small tinge of disappointment; however it is clear she is describing a six - room house. To put it in perspective, it seems that the accommodation of the overseer grades his position as mid rank. The design and layout of his quarters, as atypical as it sounds put him in a position of control but yet, reminded him that he himself was being controlled, and a clear hierarchy of discipline defined by the architecture was visible.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were the slave quarters. The design of these quarters was different depending on the type of slave you were. In North

America, for example, the field slaves were housed at the far end of the plantation in log cabins they had to build themselves. While the quarters of the house slaves (or domestic servants) were situated much closer to the plantation house, and was of much better quality than those of the field slaves. Alexander Boulton in his research study stated that, " Some of the domestic servants were often said to be living in two-storey brick structures with glass windows, far better than housing provided for the field workers."

(A. O. Boulton - Dec2006)

It is evident that the colonial Europeans had no concern in the division between slaves. This was an indirect result of where a particular slave worked on the plantation, which also determined the difference in living arrangements between slaves. It is perfectly clear that the hierarchy of control was written in stone and as a slave you were disciplined accordingly regardless of what part of the plantation you worked or lived.

One would analyse this predicament by dividing the plantation in two tiers; the upper tier and the lower tier. The upper tier was the location of the plantation house and all the buildings involved in the everyday running of the main house. This includes the quarters of the house slaves (domestic servant). Everything in the upper tier was of a high standard and build to a pristine finish as it was in the view of all who visited the plantation. Although the domestic servants where slaves and of a lower class and in those days a lower race, they were very important in the everyday running of the plantation house. They were of course under a level of control and discipline, but also under a type of dilution that is associated with any group of

individuals that relates to the title; 'the chosen few'. There were different types of quarters for house slaves scattered across the slave states which highlighted the diversity between the plantations. However there was a typical design that was very common throughout the plantations. The house slave quarter on Oakleigh plantation in the state of Alabama is an example of basic quarters for a house slave. This was a clean cut timber building with a painted finish that consisted of three one room cabins linked end to end with an overhanging front eave which created a porch like shelter to the front of the structure. This design that was very common on the gulf coast was said to be of French influence and later adopted throughout the other states. Other plantations as mentioned earlier decided to go against common practice and kept the domestic servants in-house especially if they were very low in numbers. As seen on Heritage plantation and a few others the house slaves were housed on the ground floor of the plantation house among the service rooms. This arrangement may give the false understanding of overwhelming comfort, but one would assure you that it was nothing of the sort. They were on a floor lowest of the main house and both literally and psychologically beneath the owners at all times. It also kept them away from the other slaves on the plantation, creating a new type of segregation that saw the dislike of house slaves by field slaves. The lower tier was the location of the fields and the quarters of the field slaves, and was kept to the lowest standard and upkeep. All the buildings in this tier were associated with field work and build to the bare minimum. The Typical quarters of a field slave was said to be log cabins they built themselves under the guidance of the plantation owners. In 1737 a Swiss planter who was new to the region was recorded as saying;

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“ The negro-cabins, here, was the smallest I had seen-I thought not more than twelve feet square, inside. They stood in two rows, with a wide street between them. They were built of logs, with no windows-no opening at all, except the doorway, with a chimney of sticks and mud; with no trees about them, no porches, or shades, of any kind. Except for the chimney..... I should have conjectured that it had been built for a powder-house, or perhaps an ice-house—never for an animal to sleep in.” (J. M. Vlach - pg156)

Although his description reflected the worst conditions recorded as accommodations for field slaves he was not far off. According to many literature majority of the quarters had two or more windows. Sotterly plantation in the state of Maryland for example was said to have some of the best accommodation for field slaves throughout the Americas. These cabins were very similar in sized to that described by the Swiss planter, however better built than most. The log walls of these cabins were recorded as being cut planks of logs held in place by notches and pins, far more advanced in construction and care than the common quarters for field slaves. They had several windows and sometimes two doors which created entrances to the front and rear. This did not change the fact that these quarters were still very low in quality and comfort compared to the other buildings on the plantation. It is even written that the 3. 6 meter squared space described by the Swiss planter, sometimes house two families instead of just one. Slaves had to construct partitions made of sheets and old clothe to divide the space and create a certain level of privacy between each family. The slave quarters in general had many different purposes both to the slaves and to the plantation owners. On a majority of plantations, the slave quarters were

designed and laid out like the cabins on an army barracks or even like a street of terrace houses like we see today. Some Plantation owners would even go against the norm and lay these cabins along the entrance to the Plantation house as a show of wealth and power. However, if one looks deeper into the literature, it is clear that this very common layout had a more significant stance. Michael Foucault explained it best when he stated that, " The aim is to derive the maximum advantages and to neutralize the inconveniences (thefts, interruptions of work, disturbances and ' cabals')." (M. Foucault - pg142)

The main purpose of this style and layout is to assist the owners in maintaining control. The evenly spaced identical cabins were laid out in a way which would assist in the discipline of a great number of individuals by a handful of overseers. This is similar to the way the cells of a prison are constructed or the way soldiers live in military accommodations. One would agree that the comparison of the army barracks and a prison to this layout is quite farfetched. But the principles and the said science are all the same. The layout of the slave quarters also worked greatly in the favour of the slaves. John Vlach quoted a former slave who stated that, " because their more modestly constructed slave quarters frequently were located some considerable distance from the planter's residence, slaves also had ample opportunity to take control of many domestic concerns." (J. M. Vlach - pg13)

Some strongly believed that this layout unintentionally served as the primary foundation at which the distinctive African American culture we know today started and matured. The slaves saw these quarters as a village, a small

community where they not only had song and dance, but also organised and planned.

Architecture of control was a method of discipline used to serve the social and economic needs of the plantation owners of the time. Michael Foucault explains this method of discipline as, “ a