

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Neither Ruin nor Replica

The restoration of Virginia's Menokin plantation house takes a sophisticated, ambitious approach to historic preservation.

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Exterior rendering of Menokin's 'The Glass House Project'
PHOTO: MACHADO SILVETTI

Warsaw, Va.

There are two things you can do with an architectural ruin, and both are unhappy. You can “stabilize” it—a euphemism for slowing the rate of decay—or else fabricate the missing elements to produce a facsimile of the original. The restorers of Menokin, the Virginia plantation house of Francis Lightfoot Lee, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, have now found a third way. By embedding the wreck in a shell of transparent glass that reproduces the exact dimensions of the original house, they are making a hybrid that is neither ruin nor replica but something in between. It will be completed in 2023 and it is the most fiercely ambitious historic restoration project in America today.

Menokin, which retained the Algonquin Indian name for the place, owes its survival to its remoteness. It is one hour's drive from any interstate, in the northern neck of Virginia, a backwater after intensive tobacco farming depleted the soil in the 18th century. But it was still flourishing in 1769, when Lee married the daughter of John Tayloe II and received the plantation as a wedding gift. Tayloe evidently

gave Lee not only the land and 20 slaves but the house as well, for it is a pocket-size version of his own house, Mount Airy, one of Virginia's most extravagant colonial plantation houses. Each follows the same fashionable Palladian formula of a central block set behind two flanking dependencies, and each is of superb red sandstone masonry—a rarity in Virginia, where plantation houses were typically of brick or wood.



Historic image of Menokin
PHOTO: MENOKIN FOUNDATION

Lee died in 1797, leaving no heirs. His house passed through a series of tenant farmers, who scarcely touched it. By the 1960s the structure was derelict and, in anticipation of its destruction, its decorative paneling and mantelpieces were removed for safekeeping. And just in time—a falling tree promptly crushed the house, leaving only half of it standing, along with two forlorn brick chimneys. That might have been the end, had not the Menokin Foundation acquired it in 1995 and begun the long process of stabilizing it.

There was never any question of rebuilding Menokin as it was. That kind of restoration was long ago thrown into disrepute by Colonial Williamsburg, whose cheerful re-creations of vanished colonial buildings became a watchword for what not to do. Today the chief commandment of the historic preservation community is thou shalt not simulate. From a strictly materialist point of view, the results were successful—every splinter of historical matter reverently preserved, every contemporary addition glaringly obvious—but not from a psychological perspective; restored buildings no longer felt old. They felt like the puritanical white boxes of contemporary museum design, which in some sense they are. Machado Silvetti, the prominent Boston firm of architects who were entrusted with the restoration of Menokin, recognized that such a conventional approach would not work. For one thing, the ruin itself presented an unusual opportunity, for the standing portions were astonishingly well-preserved. For an 18th-century house to survive with just two coats of interior paint is unheard of. The tree that sliced

it open laid bare a fascinating cross-section of stucco, stone, brick and plaster. Here was a compendium of 18th-century building trades—bricklaying and stone-cutting, carpentry and joinery, plastering and glazing. All is peeled apart as in a scientific dissection, and will remain visible as Machado Silvetti's glass wall begins where Menokin's jagged stone wall ends.

That the Lee family was childless proved an additional bonus, for Menokin was saddled with none of those direct descendants who are the joy and bane of all historic houses, and who can turn them into pious family shrines. In fact, the only families historically associated with the property are the descendants of the slaves who worked it. The Menokin Foundation has identified them and involved them in the project, one consequence of which is that the house is not being treated as an isolated monument but as one component in a complex cultural and economic landscape. The sites of three slave quarters have already been identified, one of which has already been speculatively rebuilt (speculatively, since the only indications of its form are the post holes of its wooden frame) as an evocative place of gathering and remembrance. After entering at the visitor's center, one will want to pause here before proceeding to the house itself.



Historic image of Menokin, damaged by a falling tree
PHOTO: MENOKIN FOUNDATION

This casts a new light on the surviving woodwork, some of it surely made by slave labor. It is strangely expressive in its dismantled state, showing exquisite finish on one side and the crude gouges of the adze on the other, speaking of ceremony and formality, but also of labor. To reinstall the paneling in a re-created house would immediately make it less interesting. But in Machado Silvetti's transparent shell of a building, one will be able to see both sides of the story, as it were, at once.

It is this duality, and not the use of glass itself, that makes this restoration so significant. At first glance, its two-part structure suggests parasitic architecture, that recent fad for affixing miniature buildings

to older ones like parasites on a host. But its visual strategy is much more sophisticated. Its glass planes can be read as solid wall or insubstantial air; look once and you see the house in all its volumetric absoluteness, look again and see the jagged ruin. It is like those drawings that can be seen either as a duck or a rabbit, depending on which shape your brain assigns it. Menokin, by taking into account what we now understand of the elasticity of visual perception, is our first important postmodern restoration. It is a cannonball flung between the feet of the historic preservation community.