

*Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's homage to Palladio in a home he never saw completed.*



*Jefferson begrudged the space staircases took up, which meant a precipitous climb for people and entry through the windows for furniture and luggage.*



cottage-like. Partly this is because Monticello's service areas – the dependencies, as they were known – are built into the slope of the hill and are invisible from the house and garden. A lot of Monticello is essentially underground.

The Monticello visitors see today is a house Jefferson never saw but only dreamed of. It was never finished in his lifetime, or even in really good shape. For fifty-four years Jefferson inhabited a building site. 'Putting up and pulling down is one of my favourite amusements,' he remarked cheerfully, and it was just as well for he never stopped tinkering and messing. Because work was so protracted, some parts of Monticello were actively deteriorating while others were still a-building.

Many aspects of Jefferson's designs were tricky. The roof was a builder's nightmare because it involved unnecessarily complicated joining of hips to slopes. 'It was one place where he was definitely more amateur than professional,' Bob Self, architectural conservator of Monticello, told me while showing me around. 'The design was perfectly sound, but just a lot more complicated than it needed to be.'

As an architect, Jefferson was fastidious to the point of weirdness. Some of

his plans specified measurements to seven decimal points. Self showed me one measuring a strangely precise 1.8991666 inches. 'Nobody, even now, could measure anything to that degree of accuracy,' he said. 'You are talking millionths of an inch. I suspect it was just a kind of intellectual exercise. There isn't anything else it could be really.'

The oddest feature of the house was the two staircases. Jefferson thought staircases a waste of space, so he made them only two feet wide and very steep – 'a little ladder of a staircase,' as one visitor put it. The stairs were so narrow and twisting that almost everything that needed to go up them, including all but the smallest pieces of visitors' luggage, had to be winched up and hauled in through a window. The stairs were buried so deep in the house that no natural light reached them, so they were forbiddingly dark as well as steep. Negotiating them, particularly in descent, is an unnerving experience even now. Because of the danger, visitors are not allowed to go up to the first or second floors, so