

Through Containment: Preservation of an 1830's Smokehouse

MATTHEW LUTZ
Virginia Tech

A Beautiful Section: One Hundred and Seventy Years in the Making

The Kentland Smokehouse is an early 19th century hexagonal Flemish bond brick building with a timber frame roof and second floor superstructure. It is a contributing building in the Kentland Farm Historic and Archeological District¹ and is suspected to be one of only two remaining hexagonal smokehouses in the New River Valley of Virginia. In the early 1990's a catastrophic collapse of the north side of the building occurred. Although one third of the brick portion of the building fell to a pile, astonishingly the roof and interior timber frame superstructure remained firmly in place. This collapse exposed a beautiful architectural section with a complex and telling story.



In 2003 a renewed interest in the Smokehouse's uniqueness prompted the department of Campus Renovation Services at Virginia Tech² to restore it to the form of its 1834 construction. The monumental presence of the smokehouse is instantly recognizable, and the disjointed and ruin-like condition of the structure unmistakably illuminates the history of the building. In its fragmented state, especially within the context of an institution of higher education, the Kentland Smokehouse serves as an instrument to discuss the formality and sophistication of an 1830's New River Valley frontier landscape. It is an X-ray of federal period masonry construction and a means of documenting that era. It appears as an almost a deliberate slice, prepared over the course of 170 years, from the architecture of 1834.

Appreciation

Exposing the distinctiveness and rarity of the archetype helped reveal the value of preserving the Kentland Smokehouse in its current ruinous state. Rather than pursuing a restoration, which could conceal the authenticity of the historic structure and could, in a worst case, come to misrepresent the structure, the design criteria became to simply capture and preserve the smokehouse within a formally sympathetic container that could shield it from the weather.

To regard the structure as an artifact within a museum was in part a direct response to the material findings within the Smokehouse. Delicate wooden window frames probably from neighboring buildings that date back to the late 1700's and hand wrought iron work were found



as though they were discarded inside. These artifacts were carefully relocated to a dedicated room for recently found artifact at the Kentland Farm Historic and Archeological District. Taking this as a cue, the Kentland Smokehouse essentially came to be treated like a rare item found in an archaeological dig. Preservation, not restoration, elevated it to its most dignified state; a mechanism for teaching within a gallery of antiquities.

Stabilization

In an effort to stabilize the Kentland Smokehouse in its current position for future study, a lightweight and highly adjustable tube-steel structure was carefully sandwiched against the load bearing brick walls and inserted beneath the interior timber frame. This stabilization structure not only braces the building against further collapse but also acts as the infrastructure for a larger protective enclosure around the exterior. The quality of the intervention is such that it was engaged to the Smokehouse without damaging any original historic components. Built from structural pipe-fittings, 2" diameter schedule 40 steel tube, and screw-type scaffolding feet, the stabilization structure can accommodate for future movement and unpredicted dynamic loading by allowing for a wide range of adjustability in its foundation and lateral bracing elements.



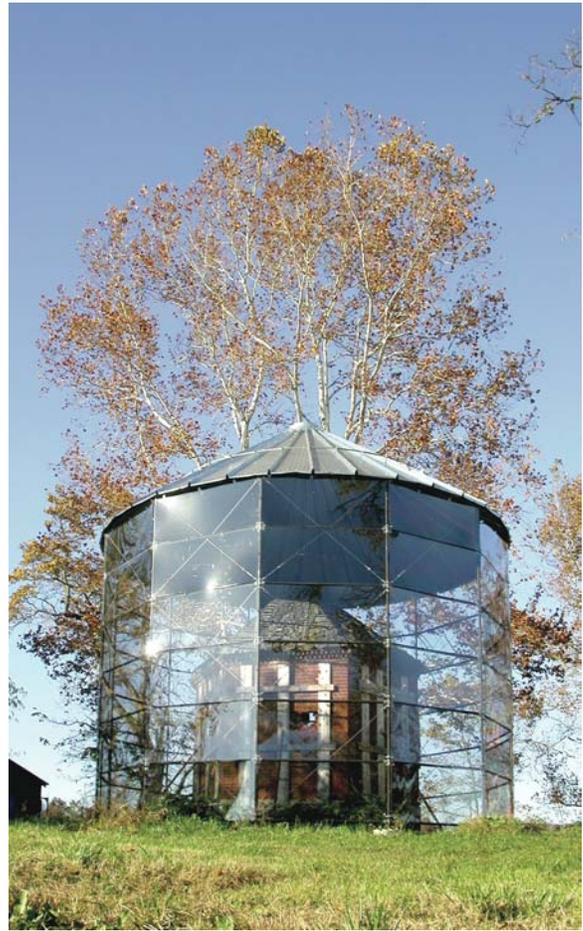
Containment

Immediately following the installation of the stabilization structure, a faceted transparent drum was constructed around the Smokehouse to protect it from the weather. This cylinder, like the hexagonal smokehouse it protects, gives no axial preference, but serves as a counterpoint to the rigid axial formality of the surrounding federal style agricultural landscape. The protective enclosure is made from modular components that are typical in the surrounding landscape; pipe-fittings, turn-buckles, a grain bin roof.



These modern elements, unlike those of the federal era Smokehouse, are intended to be ephemeral. They will be removed when the smokehouse can no longer survive as a ruin, at which time perhaps a sympathetic reconstruction could occur.

At a distance this hybrid of structures, one modern and ephemeral, the other historic and lasting, reads as though two architectures have slipped over each other. Of the programmatic elements included in this project, pronouncing the appreciation of the historic structure was primary. Containing the Smokehouse in a precious box presented the neglected little brick building as something beloved; the preciousness of the smokehouse became manifest once contained. Toward this end the maneuver of containing the smokehouse within a transparent box works to *expose the mystery*³ of it and perhaps contributes toward engaging the public and encouraging participation in the preservation of the surrounding historic district.



Endnotes

¹. *The Kentland Farm Historic and Archaeological District* is part of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences of Virginia Tech and is home to The Kentland Farm College Farm Operation under the direction of Dwight M. Paulette.

². Lynn Eichhorn, under whose auspices the project designer was working, directs Campus Renovation Services of Virginia Tech.

³. From Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look At How We Experience Space*. 3:82-83 An inversion of Bachelards example of a Japanese lacquer box being used as a place to hide secrets.