The Continuing Influence of Greek and Roman Architecture
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The classical legacy—the language of form deriving from ancient Greece and Rome—has proved so durable that some scholars have defined the entire western architectural tradition as a struggle to come to terms with antiquity. Classicism has remained a consistent source of inspiration for architects and planners; however, what is understood as characteristic of the classical tradition has been mutable, and different societies have attached different meanings to its forms, symbols, and principles. Whether they reference classical ornament, the classical orders, or, indeed, the very idea of an order that can be imposed holistically on the built environment, the ways in which disparate eras have revived the architecture of antiquity reveal a persistent preoccupation with cultural origins and with architecture's own history.

The architecture of both ancient Greece and Rome was the product of an effort to define the shape of civilization itself. Nurtured by philosophy, the ancient Greek worldview posited social, political, and architectural questions as fundamentally linked. As the prowess of the Greek city-state increased, and as city-states began to compete for prominence, architecture gained in importance as a tangible representation of political ideals. The character of the *polis* and the strength of its institutions were thus to be embodied in its architecture. On the Athenian Acropolis (Figure 4.2-14), for example, different registers of architecture coexist, with temples and sanctuaries dedicated to multiple gods alongside sculpted scenes of Athenian life (such as the depiction of the Panathenaic procession on the Parthenon frieze). In architecture, Hellenistic thought found reconciliation between the abstract and unknowable lives of the gods and the real lives of humans on Earth, and between democratic idealism and often violent militarism.
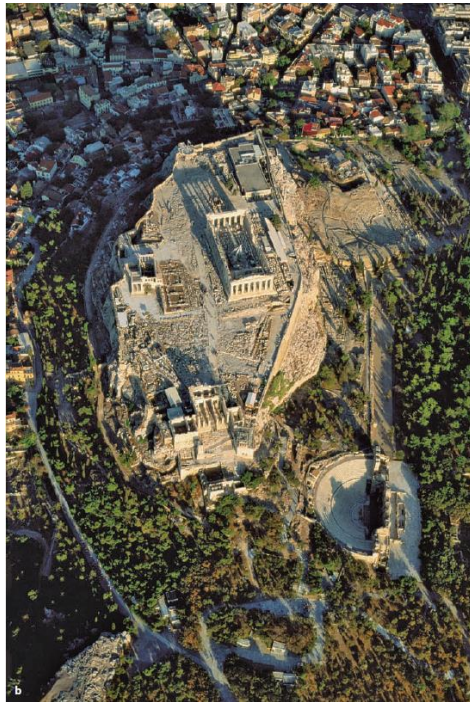

Figure 4.2-14

With different cultural aims in mind, Roman architecture charted a different course, one that often pursued solutions to more pragmatic problems. Architecture—and architectural theory—were placed in the service of imperial expansion. Applying the technology of the arch, vault, and dome, and using the materials of brick and concrete, builders at home and in the colonies defined an identifiably Roman style that reiterated a central message: Rome as *caput mundi*, administered by an all-seeing emperor. The emphasis on everyday life that characterized Roman thought also permeated its architecture, and the most successful emperors were those who channeled funds into the development of public spaces and amenities like baths, markets, and theaters. Trajan's Aqueduct in Segovia, Spain (Figure 5.1-2) has survived the passage of nearly two millennia (with repairs and reconstructions along the way), demonstrating the durable visual power of repeated classical modules. As in many of Rome's constructions, infrastructure is translated into monumental form, reminding viewers across centuries of the reach and influence of the empire. Even in a building as significant as Rome's Pantheon—the temple dedicated to all the Roman gods (Figure 5.1-30)—the spectacular is combined with the practical. The vast, uninterrupted space on the interior of the building is at once an ideal illustration of the Roman cosmological view and a treatise on concrete engineering, with coffers and cleverly composed aggregate designed to lighten the weight of the dome itself. Bolstered by the writings of Vitruvius, whose *De architectura* (*Ten Books on Architecture*) provided a comprehensive guide to Roman architectural thought that could travel anywhere in the colonies, Roman architecture spread throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean.
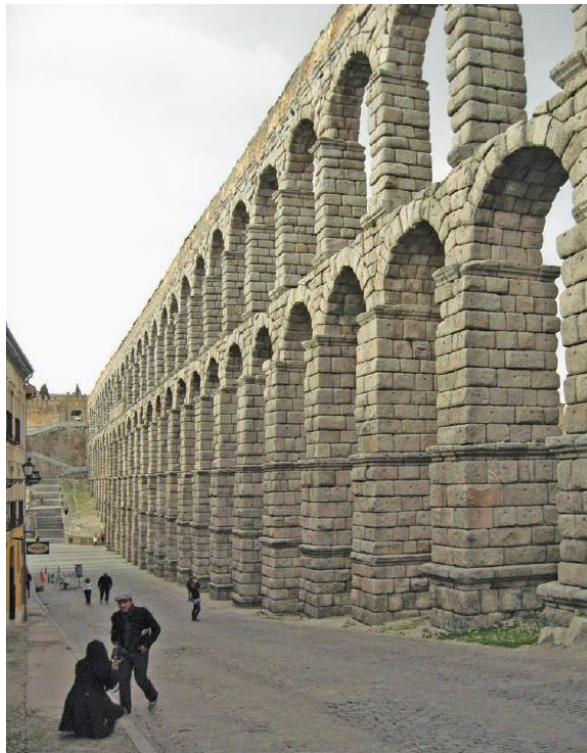

Figure 5.1-2

Figure 5.1-30

Though classical forms had by no means disappeared during the medieval period—consider the sturdy "Romanesque" arches of Charlemagne's imperial chapel at Aachen, for example (Figure 8.3-2)—architects in Renaissance Italy declared a new dedication to the revival of original classical principles. This revival required studying classical monuments firsthand and reading the works of Vitruvius, whose texts had been rediscovered in monastery libraries. According to the architectural historian Rudolf Wittkower, Renaissance architects were "haunted" by Vitruvius's description of a man's body inscribed within both a square and a circle, finding in this image a relatable commingling of humanism and faith. Among others, Leon Battista Alberti combined the foundations of Vitruvius's architectural theory with emergent Renaissance principles, completing his own *De re aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building*) around 1452. While he updated some passages of the ten books for his specific audience, other sections hew closely to their classical source, including Vitruvius's account of the human body as the origin of the orders. Alberti claimed that architectural beauty resulted from the integration of all its parts into a state of harmony. Only by placing all elements of a structure in proportion to each other could an architect create a sympathetic and pleasurable bodily response in the viewer.
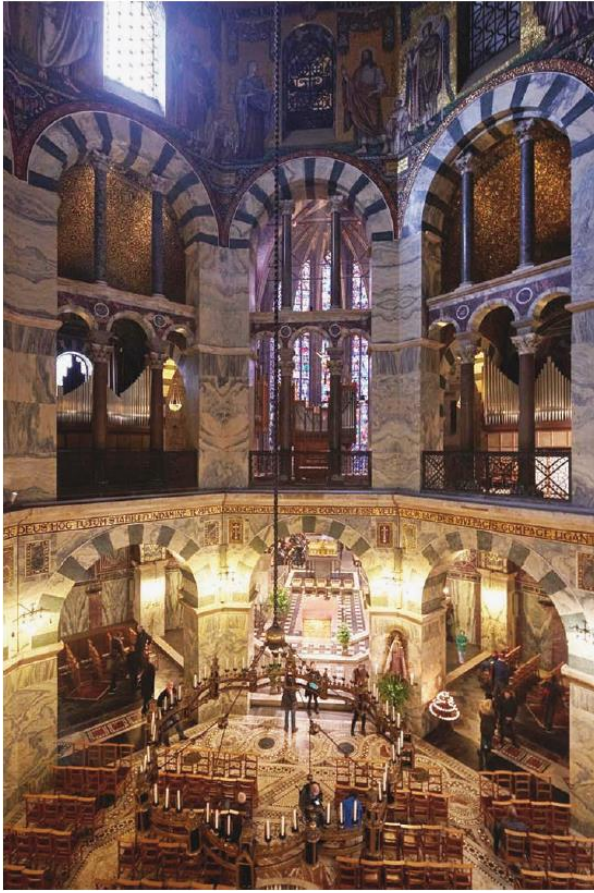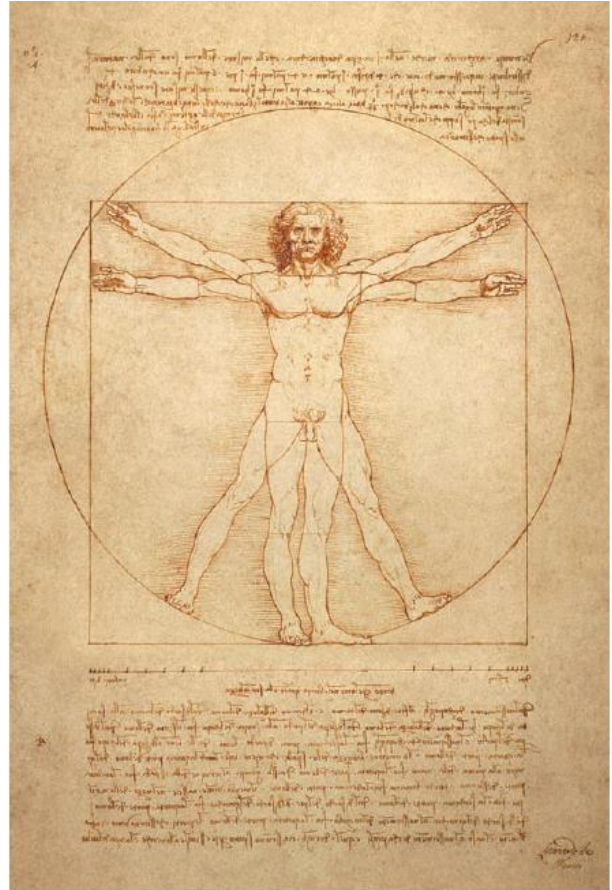
| Figure 8.3-2 | Leonardo Da Vinci, "Vitruvian Man" |

This principle of *concinnitas* permeates Alberti's design for the façade of Sta. Maria Novella in Florence (Figure 10.1-14), finished in 1470. Here, the façade is treated as a wall plane defining the character of the piazza. Alberti inventively reused classical motifs (the flattened temple front; the scrolls linking the two levels) into a modular and unified design. The source of Sta. Maria Novella's design was in antiquity, but its message was rooted in a Christian cosmology in which geometry itself reveals a universally valid harmony created by God. Architects of the Baroque, such as Carlo Fontana, abandoned Alberti's optical, harmonious approach to classicism in favor of architecture of dramatic bodily effects. His design for the façade of San Marcello al Corso in Rome (Figure 13.2-1), built in the 1670s, layers geometric planes and recesses to create theatrical plays of light and shadow. The elaborately sculptural façade steps forward towards the central bay, thus entering and engaging the physical space of the viewer.

Figure 10.1-14

Figure 13.2-1

In the wake of the Enlightenment, the classical tradition experienced another reconsideration, in which the use of Greek and Roman precedents became politically and ideologically charged with a fervid patriotism. As Enlightenment ideals spread, countries competed vehemently (though sometimes incoherently) to declare themselves the heirs of Greece and Rome. The stakes of this competition were often quite high in an expanding economy dominated by the form of the nation-state.

The race to claim Greek heritage was particularly charged in the German-speaking world, as it was believed that Greeks and Germans shared an almost mystical similarity in politics, philosophy, religion, ethics, and aesthetics. The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) among others theorized that Greece and Germany had a natural affinity because they were both original cultures with original languages. The German language, he argued, had arisen from local dialects, as had the Greek language millennia before, and, unlike other European languages, it had resisted Romanization. Therefore, the use of Greek Revival architecture had special meaning in the Prussian capital of Berlin, as it sought to establish itself as an economic and cultural center on par with London, Paris, and Rome. Carl Gotthard Langhans' Brandenburg Gate, built in 1789 (Figure 15.1-3), is based on the Athenian Propylaia. The strict Doric portico is topped by a sculpted quadriga symbolizing Prussia's past and future military victories (a message that rankled Napoleon, who confiscated the quadriga during his conquest of the city in 1806). Considered to be a visible extension of the German art historian J. J. Winckelmann's theories on the unmatched value of Greek art, it was one of numerous neoclassical gateways built in German towns around the turn of the nineteenth century. Since many growing cities still had portions of their historical walls standing, this type became an immediately popular expression of classical ideals.

Figure 15.1-3

Despite Friedrich Gilly's sadly truncated career—he died at the age of only 28—he left behind several forceful demonstrations of classicism's modern potential. The son of the architect David Gilly, who founded what was to become the Bauakademie, Gilly gained instant renown in 1796 with his entry in a competition for a memorial to Friedrich the Great (Figure 15.1-4). For his design, Gilly moved the site from the centrally located plot on Unter den Linden dictated by the competition brief to the Leipziger Platz, directly south of the Brandenburg Gate. There he created an entire memorial precinct rather than a single monument. The precinct was to be entered through a massive gate, which at once evoked the neoclassical (framed by Doric colonnades, it is unmistakably a relative of Langhan's Brandenburg Gate) and the classical (its immense central portal is derived directly from the Roman triumphal arch). The Prussian king's sarcophagus would lie in a vaulted chamber within a tall, fortress-like base that was surrounded by six black obelisks. At the summit of the terraced base stood a Doric temple recalling the Parthenon. From this vantage point atop Berlin's acropolis would unfurl sweeping views of the city below—as Gilly described it, "A unique panorama of its kind!"

 Figure 15.1-4

The popularity of Gilly's memorial transformed the character of urban design in Germany, and his emphasis on optical effects and the interrelationship between buildings was carried on by the next generation of Prussian architects, particularly Karl Friedrich Schinkel. While best known for his complex and elegant designs for the Schauspielhaus and the Altes Museum (Figures 15.1-6 and 15.1-7), it is the Neue Wache (New Guardhouse) (Figure 15.1-5), begun in 1816, that best reveals his attitude towards classical precedents. For Schinkel, the essence of classical architecture was not its decorative motifs, but rather the direct visual impact created by its geometric massing. Four stout pylons frame the structure and hold it in a compact, cubical form. The use of the Doric order radiates a strength and permanence that are surprising in a structure so small. Visually arresting, dignified, and restrained, the guardhouse suggested a stern corrective to the ostentatious baroque of the Crown Prince's palace over which it kept watch across Unter den Linden. This new classicism embodied a world made orderly both by the energy of the Prussian military and the vigor of the kingdom's philosophers.

Figure 15.1-6

Figure 15.1-7

Figure 15.1-5

In the twentieth century, the classical style provided a powerful tool for colonial expansion and imperial conquest. The imperial aspirations of totalitarian regimes in the middle of the century aimed at the subjugation of vast, new territories, but architectural efforts were often concentrated on renovating existing capital cities. The architects of Mussolini's Rome (Figure 18.3-8) and Hitler's Germania (Figure 18.3-15) essentially combined modern materials and techniques with Greek and Roman forms to create a surface classicism whose impact depended on its colossal size. The outsized scale of this fascist architecture was intended to awe the viewer, subsuming individual agency into a collective myth of cultural destiny, be it Italy's unique claim to Roman heritage or Germany's vividly imagined Hellenism.

Figure 18.3-8

Figure 18.3-15

Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker's Viceroy's House in New Delhi (Figure 17.2-4), on the other hand, shows the way in which colonial contact occasionally produced subtle and synthetic architectural expressions.

Figure 17.2-4

Lutyens had first arrived in India in 1912, determined that "old England" would "stand up and plant her great traditions and good taste where she goes and not pander to sentiment and all this silly Moghul-Hindu stuff." His original design for the Viceroy's House thus reached back to Lord Burlington and William Kent's Chiswick House of two centuries earlier (Figure 13.1-19), which itself was patterned on Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotunda.

Figure 13.1-19

For Lutyens, the reposeful and orderly spaces of Palladianism were a means by which British order could be imposed on the *terra incognita* of India. Yet over the seventeen years that it took to build the enormous structure, changes to the design show the ways in which Indian architecture began to impact his thinking. Ultimately, he raised the dome to resemble an early Buddhist stupa and enriched the classical massing of the building with several traditional Indian forms: a deep cornice known as a *chajja*, or sun-breaker; a latticed window screen called a *jali*; and *chattri*, or umbrella domes, which dotted the roof. Though the overall composition of the building remained decidedly classical and western, these regional details made of the building an unusual hybrid, one of many such hybrids built under colonial rule.

Despite modern architecture's insistence that progress depended on a clean break with the past, the architecture of the last century has hardly dismantled the classical tradition. On the contrary, architects have continuously acknowledged their debt to classical architecture, including modernists like Peter Behrens, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, and contemporary architects like James Stirling, Leon Krier, and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Postmodernism, in particular, offered architects the opportunity to experiment freely with Greek and Roman forms to create new, up-to-date architectural effects. Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia (Figure 20.1-16), constructed in 1976 on a tight urban site in the Warehouse District of New Orleans, is a scenographic stage set that recalls Baroque urban schemes. Six freestanding, curved colonnades encircle a pool, into which extends a fountain shaped like the "boot" of the Italian peninsula. The materials are intentionally non-classical; columns are clad in stainless steel, and neon tubes enliven the space after dark. In addition to the five Roman orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan, and Composite), Moore invented a sixth—the "Delicatessen" order, meant to resemble sausages hanging in a shop window—and terracotta rondels depicting the architect's own face spit streams of water into the pool below. Moore's deliberately kitschy *all'antica* vision in this public space is a spirited celebration of the ongoing relevance and vitality of classicism.

Figure 20.1-16

For Further Reading

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