

The Relationship between Architecture and Politics: A Case Study of Ancient Roman Architecture

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Abstract: Politics cannot exist independently of architecture, and to a particular extent, architecture also serves politics. This paper examines the relationship between politics and architecture in ancient Rome through a study of the relevant academic literature, starting with the relationship between politics and architecture in the Etruscan period, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire, and combining the resulting theories with contemporary architecture. The relationship between politics and architecture can be summarised as inherited, social and national. The application of these three relationships in the present era has produced several representative buildings. There is a specific inheritance of architecture from the Etruscan period, architecture from the Roman Republic served the needs of society, and architecture from the Roman Empire became a symbol of state power. These elements are all reflected in architecture all around the world nowadays.

Keywords: Architectural history, Art history, Cultural heritage, Political studies

1. Introduction

Aristotle believed that man was a naturally political animal and that politics and city-state building went hand in hand. The development of politics would accelerate the city-state's development or even lead to its demise. Moreover, architecture, as a response to human intelligence, would, in a sense, also reflect the political situation of the time. This article examines the relationship between architecture and politics in ancient Rome and further analyses it in the context of today's society. Ancient Rome, which began in the middle of the Italian peninsula, went through the Roman Age of Kingship, the Roman Republic, and the Roman Empire. During these three periods, ancient Rome expanded its territory and prospered politically. The Romanesque theatre, the triumphal arch, and the Colosseum were built in this context and have been the subject of later studies. Most previous studies have been confined to a single study of the architecture of the Roman imperial period, lacking analysis of the architecture of other periods, making it difficult to draw a more comprehensive conclusion. Furthermore, the relationship between architecture and politics is not exclusive to antiquity; architecture in contemporary society, particularly in the late Cold War period, is also an aspect worth analyzing.

2. The Etruscan Period: An inheritance of Greek architecture

Etruria was one of the most important cities on the Italian peninsula. Although not much has been written about the Etruscans, archaeological findings indicate that the Etruscans on the Italian peninsula had a high artistic and cultural development [1]. For example, Fu points out that the emergence of urban societies, outstanding achievements in stonework, ceramic techniques, and the construction of vaults are the significant achievements of Etruria [2]. These techniques, which have Greek characteristics, influenced Rome's development at the time [3]. Thus, it can be seen that many aspects of early Roman culture may receive varying degrees of Etruscan and Greek influence.

In addition, as Rome continued to expand and technology developed, concrete was used extensively in urban construction as a prominent achievement in Roman architecture. Fu believes that in the mid-first century AD, the Romans combined Etruscan decorative arch vouchers with concrete, giving rise to the cross arch [2]. The cross arch is an intersecting barrel arch, as shown in Figure 1. It covers a square space and requires only columns at the four corners without the need for continuous load-bearing walls, a technique that allows more space inside the building; it also allows the opening of side windows and facilitates the lighting of large buildings. This arch technique would have produced the more iconic theatre and the bath during the Roman Republic.

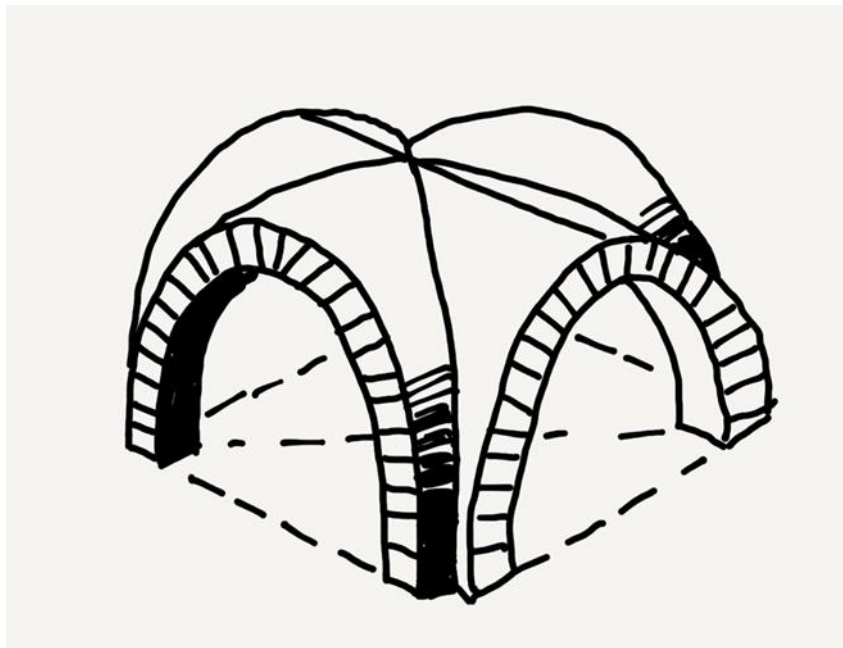


Figure 1: Diagram of the cross arch (Photo credit: Original).

Roman architecture at this time still retains a great deal of Greek residue and is not yet closely integrated with politics. However, as Rome continued to expand, later buildings would gradually build on this to reveal their Roman character. It is easy to see from this that there is a specific assertion of sovereignty in inheritance, and a little explanation of this view can be found in the animal world. Having snatched food from another monkey, a monkey will often hold it aloft to show off to the monkeys around it. The Romans' use of the architectural elements of the conquered Etruscan for their purposes may have been motivated by technical necessity. However, it cannot be denied that it may also have been political aggrandizement. Suppose Rome at the time is compared to a triumphant monkey. In that case, applying architectural elements from the conquered culture to its architecture is like showing off to other monkeys: "Look, I got it, look, I conquered!" The relationship between

politics and architecture in the Etruscan period can therefore be summarised as inherited, i.e., a declaration of sovereignty.

3. The Roman Republic Period: Social Enrichment and Spiritual Enjoyment

If the Roman architecture of the Etruscan period were not yet a notable achievement, the architecture of the Roman Republic would become representative of Roman society. Fu emphasizes that during this period, the Romans absorbed Greek lifestyles and architectural techniques and began to build public buildings such as theatres and baths [2]. Similarly, Kang notes that as Rome continued to expand, the city grew, and infrastructure, particularly public buildings, began to be built [4]. Besides, smooth politics and rich finances promote the building of infrastructure. Rome was at such a stage at that time. The external expansion gave Rome access to a more significant labor force, and economic development widened the economic gap between the plebeians and the nobility; hedonism became popular among the nobility [5]. More and more entertaining buildings were built in Rome to satisfy the entertainment needs of the upper classes. After more than two hundred years of tireless efforts to resolve the conflict between the plebeians and the nobility, Roman society needed more prominent and better recreational areas to meet the growing needs of its citizens.

The more representative buildings of that time are the Roman theatres, which developed into the famous Colosseum during the Empire that became representative of Roman dome technology with its centralized dome covering. The influence of the coastal area, the Mediterranean Gulf of Naples, and Mount Vesuvius provided the city with excellent building materials such as stone and volcanic mortar. The Roman theatre, which began as a Greek semicircular theatre, was able to escape the disadvantage of being built on a hill and in a remote location by using concrete technology to build a theatre of several floors directly in the middle of the city [6]. Such architecture made the city of Rome more compact and more convenient for the daily life of its citizens. This not only satisfied the hedonistic spirit of the citizens of the Roman Republic but also reflected the situation of civic politics at the time.

Maslow's theory of needs can be used to argue for a relationship between politics, materiality, and social construction. The country's national power may increase somewhat as politics continues to mature. This increase in national power leads to an increase in material wealth, a shift from basic physiological needs to higher needs, and a large amount of wealth to support the development of higher needs. Political changes and foreign expansion during the Roman Republic accumulated wealth. Therefore, people began to build theatres for conversation and entertainment to satisfy social needs, private baths to highlight status to satisfy respect needs, and even gave people in professions such as politicians and architects the space to develop their values and satisfy their needs for self-fulfillment. In summary, the architecture of the Roman Empire was primarily social, i.e., the constant satisfaction of needs.

4. The Roman Empire Period: A Manifestation of Imperial Ambition and Honour

Fu argues that during the Roman Empire, when the expansion of territory and the plundering of wealth reached their peak, the celebration of power and the flaunting of wealth also became the main tasks of the architecture of the time [1]. The Roman architecture of this period was based on the same principle: conservation as monuments, which means that all buildings had to reflect the ambition and glory of the Empire. Zhang divides the buildings that the Romans were keen to build over the ages into two categories, those of entertainment, as mentioned earlier and a few monumental architectures that were victorious in wars of aggression and celebrated the achievements of the emperor [7].

First of all, analysis of the architecture in terms of entertainment. The architecture of the imperial period added the political outlook of the Romans to the entertainment of the republican period. The

Romans made the pursuit of large spaces within buildings an essential feature of their architectural thinking, innovating the arches and vaults to create large vaults to showcase the splendor of their buildings. The Pantheon of Rome, for example (Figure 2), the only large dome of its kind in the history of world architecture, formed a vast space that covered all visitors like the sky [8], reflecting the Roman concept of imperial supremacy and the ambition to conquer the world.



Figure 2: The great dome of the Pantheon in Rome (Linstitute, 2018).

In addition, from the perspective of monumental architecture, Zhang points out that the buildings of the Roman Empire not only have the distinctive character of a slave-holding military empire but also reflect the changes in the architectural style of the period. During this period, architecture almost lost its significance as a socio-economic activity and became a monument to the merits of successive emperors [7]. Augustus, the Empire's founder, boasted of having built eighty-two temples, glorifying Rome and declaring his achievements. Triumphal arches, which originated in the late Roman Republic, were built most frequently during the Roman Empire. As monumental buildings that flaunted the Roman Empire's foreign aggression, triumphal arches reflected the Romans' bragging rights as conquerors and demonstrated the brilliant achievements of Roman architecture [9].

It is clear from this that architecture and politics were closely linked during the Roman Empire; whether it was the triumphal arch or the Pantheon of Rome, these buildings not only showcased the incredible power of the Roman Empire but also reflected the political ambitions of the Romans who were keen on wealth and glory and expansion [10].

It may be challenging to identify a country that neither expresses its power nor glorifies the achievements of its leaders. One can find a taste of Venice in Eritrea, an Italian colony in Africa; a portrait of Chairman Mao on Tiananmen Square; and even in the Republic of the Isle of Roses, a short-lived micro-state, one can find many flagpoles and flags flying on artificial islands. All this is the history that took place after the Roman Empire and is the embodiment of architecture in the service of politics. These architectural phenomena can perhaps be summed up in one point: architecture serves architecture, and between the two, there is a national character, that is, an expression of power.

5. From Ancient Rome to Modern Times

Whether it was the inheritance and development of Greek architectural features in the Etruscan period, the hedonistic social architecture of the Roman Republic, or even the monumental architecture of the Roman Empire, all have a high degree of relevance to the political developments of the time in Rome. Summing up the above analysis, the relationship between politics and architecture can be summarised in three points: inherited - a declaration of sovereignty; social - need fulfillment; and national - a

reminder of honor. This accentuation of the relationship between politics and architecture is not only present in ancient Rome but is also reflected in today's society.

Inheritance is exemplified by the Government Headquarters in Macao, a Portuguese-style building that was positioned by the Portuguese government as the office of the Portuguese Governor of Macao in 1884, where the lowering of the Portuguese flag was held during the return of Macao to China in 1999, and which is still used as the headquarter of the Macao SAR Government. The succession and change of use of this building are intended to emphasize, from a personal point of view, the change of sovereignty of Macao, using a colonial political building to assert China's ownership of the city.

The Great Wall Hotel of China exemplifies the social aspect. Built in 1983, the Great Wall Hotel impressed the Chinese of the time with its glass curtain wall, shared atrium, lift, and the hotel restaurant, among other Western architectural models. After the Cultural Revolution, the political model of reform and opening up led to rapid economic development, and the Chinese people moved from a basic need for food and warmth to a higher pursuit of good food and beauty. The upward political development promoted economic growth, and economic growth promoted increased social demand. The buildings represented by the Great Wall Hotel became the model of social architecture in China at that time and became the standard for high-class hotels in China.

National architecture is exemplified by the North Korean Arc de Triomphe, the world's largest triumphal arch in Pyongyang, North Korea. This monumental building was built on the occasion of Kim Il Sung's 70th birthday, and the building is inscribed with Mount Paektu, the Song of General Kim Il Sung, and the year in which Kim Il Sung joined the revolution and returned home in triumph. Such a triumphal arch, which mainly celebrates Kim Il Sung, symbolizes to some extent the political spirit of the DPRK and strengthens national cohesion.

6. Conclusion

Architecture and politics are closely linked, for political development requires a particular space, just as the triumphal arch and the Pillars of Merit tell the story of the expansion of the Roman Empire. The representation of Greek elements in Roman architecture also illustrates the declarative nature of sovereignty in the building. Moreover, without political support, there would have been no economic security, and architecture, whether national or social, would not have been built; for example, without the political unity and expansion of Roman plunder, there would have been no magnificent Pantheon or baths for spiritual needs. The inheritance between architecture and politics can be seen in the architectural styles of the Etruscan period, the social dimension of architecture and politics in the public buildings of the Roman Republic that met the needs of the citizens for spiritual enjoyment, and the inheritance between architecture and politics in the monuments of the Roman Empire. Into context today, it can be glimpsed in the Portuguese-style architecture of Macao, in the infrastructure of mainland China after the reform and opening up of the country, and in the Arc de Triomphe of North Korea. The inheritance, the social and the national, extracted from the architecture of ancient Rome, is still alive and well in today's countries, and politics may become an essential part of the future development of architecture.

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