

## JKWIS 2014 Architecture in Society

### Architecture: A Testimony to Artistic and Cultural Evolution

*A man can do all things if he will.* Leon Battista Alberti

*If you knew how much work went into it, you wouldn't call it genius.* Michelangelo Buonarroti

The Renaissance – as its name suggests – marked a significant break with the past; gone were the intricacies and soaring spires of the medieval gothic, to be replaced by a belief in the supremacy of the human mind and man's potential to understand and master techniques of art, science, and mathematics. The term "Renaissance man" has been coined to describe a polymath with interests and expertise across a range of disciplines.

As we saw in the first month of JKWIS, Filippo Brunelleschi's dome of Florence cathedral was celebrated arguably as much for its technical originality as for its pure beauty; it remains an incompletely understood wonder of architecture. Brunelleschi's first architectural commission, the old sacristy at San Lorenzo in Florence, exhibited his mathematical rigour and symmetry, as does the regularity of the [Pazzi chapel](#). Brunelleschi is also credited by many art historians with the invention of pictorial perspective, possibly surprising given his background as a goldsmith and sculptor, rather than a painter.

This month JKWIS considers how far architecture is a reflection of the art, culture, scientific knowledge and patronage of the age.



*Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence; Brunelleschi, 1421*

The Renaissance marked an evolution in thought, and this evolution transmitted itself to art, to culture, and to the architecture of the period. *Do you think this makes the Renaissance unique, or does the architecture that we examined in the first month simply reflect the artistic and cultural style of its*

age?

Another literal and figurative Renaissance man was [Leon Battista Alberti](#). As with Brunelleschi, he underlined the contribution of science and mathematics to his art: “I will take first from the mathematicians those things with which my subject [painting] is concerned.” His eminence as an architect stems both from his treatise – [De Re Aedificatoria](#) (in which he celebrates classical lines and regularity) – and his edifices themselves. Notably, he did not name his sacred buildings churches but “temples”, and his Tempio Malatestiana in Rimini was thought insufficiently sacred; his patron was excommunicated by the pope.



*Tempio Malatestiana, Rimini; Alberti, 1450*

Alberti’s debt to classical architecture can best be seen in the façade of his Palazzo Rucellai, also in Florence. It is noted, according to Robert Harbison, for “its meticulous grading of the classical orders, from Doric at the bottom, to Corinthian at the top”.



*Palazzo Rucellai, Florence; Alberti, 1455*

An academic treatment of the relationship between architecture and mathematics, so important to Brunelleschi and Alberti, is summarised [in this essay](http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Architecture.html).<http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Architecture.html> - s66

<http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/HistTopics/Architecture.html> - s66

The great sculptors, artists, and architects of the Renaissance needed patrons to fund their work; thus they had to be in tune not only with the general sound of their age, but with the specific one demanded from these patrons. Alberti constructed the palazzo above for Giovanni Rucellai, and a [palace at Urbino](#) for Federico da Montefeltro, but perhaps the most famous of the Renaissance patrons were the [Medici](#). Cosimo de' Medici – who once said that “spending money gives me greater pleasure than earning it” – was patron of Brunelleschi and Donatello, amongst others. The commissioning of art was – and is – felt by some to be a civic duty on the acquisition of wealth but others (such as Anthony Sampson) have questioned the legitimacy that such commissioning has given to the patrons. The Laurentian Library, designed by Michelangelo under the patronage of the Medici pope Clement VII, was allegedly constructed to show that the Medici had graduated from merchants to the ranks of the intelligentsia and the church. Michelangelo also designed the [New Sacristy](#) of the San Lorenzo Basilica for the Medici.

*How far can we associate styles of art with corresponding styles of architecture? Renaissance Men such as Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and Donatello spring readily to mind, but what of other schools? In Prague next year you will encounter examples of [Czech cubism](#), such as the House of the Black Madonna.*



*House of the Black Madonna, Prague; Josef Gocar, 1911*

Great works of architecture require funding, and thus – at least in part – will reflect the views of the patron, be it an individual, the church, or the state. From Michelangelo's [ceiling of the Sistine Chapel](#), to the [Sydney Opera House](#), to the [Reichstag Dome](#), it is important for us to consider how far the architecture of any time and place is a comment not just on the contemporary art and culture, but also on the outlook or purposes of the commissioner.



*Reichstag Dome, Berlin; Norman Foster, 1995*

The UK government's choice to commission the [Millennium Dome](#) was deeply controversial. The Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava has even been [accused of "bleeding Valencia dry"](#) as local government commissioning of architecture in the boom years of the last decade now appears impossible to finance; [this Guardian article](#) worries about the effect of the current economic crisis on the future state funding of architecture. *Do you think that local or national government commissioning of architecture should have objective criteria that can be open to scrutiny; and if so, what criteria should apply?*

The boundaries between ideological reflection, and national celebration or commemoration, will not always be clear. Next month we will examine the role of ideology more closely, but look at this [memorial to Operation Anthropoid](#) in Prague, and the explanation for its particular form. *Why do you think such public memorials might be controversial?*



*Operation Anthropoid Memorial, Prague; Tumova and Gulbis, 2009*

What criteria should we apply to judge the "success" of an architectural project? In this [fascinating TED talk](#), Michiel van Iersel explains that "failed architecture" might not always be due to objective criteria, but at times to a more ephemeral stigmatizing. *Can you think of architecture generally agreed to have succeeded or failed in your own country?* Van Iersel makes the distinction between engineers, architects and town planners; he suggests that Le Corbusier, for example, is now more famous as a style icon than as an architect per se.

Modern technology – as for Brunelleschi – has changed the ability of architects to realize their dreams. [Rem Koolhaas](#), the architect of the CCTV Tower in Beijing, has said "design today becomes as easy as Photoshop, even on the scale of a city". *Will this continue apace, and what will this mean for the role of the architect? Will it become ever easier to create new buildings using a computer, and if so, is this society's gain?* Modern technology – such as 3D printing – also allows the speed of construction to be much greater than in the past; *will this have implications for the way in which society values its built space, or the uses to which the space will be put? Do you agree with van Iersel's thesis is that architects are "losing touch" with what is happening around them as planning and architecture becomes increasingly "virtual"?*

Neri Oxman synthesizes some of the questions we have examined in our first two essays in [this talk on the design of form](#); see how far you agree with her more optimistic view of technology and human

advance. [David Chipperfield's view](#) is that the lack of quality in the very debate regarding architecture "has an effect on the quality of architectural production and the way our cities are". In this way, modern technology has its impact by the tenor of the debate: the ease and polemic of modern argument affect the output of architects. *Is this merely a modern expression of an ancient phenomenon – were Brunelleschi and Michelangelo as sensitive to criticism, just not as exposed to it? – or are we witnessing something qualitatively different as our culture evolves?*

Perhaps what we find today, and in the Renaissance, is that architecture – as with other areas of human endeavour – resists neat compartmentalisation, and that as art, culture, technology and society evolve, so must architecture.

For the second essay in the JKWIS 2013-14, I would like you to address the following question, after a month of online debate among yourselves and with me and your teachers:

**How far does architecture bear witness to contemporary art or culture?**

Post your responses, containing appropriate examples to support your argument, online in fewer than 750 words and by December 12, 2013.

Tim Parkinson  
November 12, 2013