

Patronage and Prevailing Culture in Architecture

Armand Jhala and Steve Wood

Architecture historically has been infused with the culture of the societies in which it was created. From classical Greek culture to the Italian Renaissance and subsequent Baroque movement, architecture defines or is defined by the prevailing art of the culture. Architectural projects, however, are influenced by the patrons who pay for the work, as perhaps most notably portrayed by the patrons of the Italian Renaissance. As such, architecture reflects both the prevailing culture and, because of the heavy funding necessary, the goals and attitude of the patron or group providing money for the project.

Greek architecture provides a prime example of architecture as a basis of a culture. Foremost stands the Athenian Acropolis, a monumental set of temples and public buildings, which served both as a cultural center for Greek religion and as a grand display of Athenian power, meanwhile exemplifying the pinnacle of Greek architecture. The Parthenon, for example, built as part of the Acropolis in 447 BC as a temple for Athena, has withstood two millennia and still functions as a powerful symbol of ancient Greek architecture and religion.

The Renaissance, as pertaining to architecture, symbolized a rebirth of ancient Roman standards. The classical antiquity that had been put to bed for nearly a thousand years began to reappear in High Renaissance architecture. Donato Bramante in 1502 formed the design for the San Pietro in Montorio. This ancient church drew inspiration from ancient Roman temples – specifically, the Temple of Vesta. The Tempietto part of the church represents a masterpiece in Renaissance architecture as Bramante infused the use of the Doric order – a classical architecture system – with a blend of new Renaissance technique. In 1472, Leon Alberti started to design the Basilica of Sant’Andrea. The entire facade of the construct was meant to resemble the Arch of Titus of ancient Rome. The roof also contains a wagon vault, essentially a single curve throughout the entire roof, resembling the massive Basilica of Maxentius in the Roman Forum.



In examining the rebirth of Roman culture in Italy, one must understand that patronage was essential to Renaissance architecture, especially as a small number families controlled much of the wealth, the most important being the Medici family. From the 15th to 16th century, the Medici family controlled Florence and the art and architecture that was created. Giovanni Medici commissioned the building of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, which served as the burial place for Medici family members. The dark stone, columns, arches, and spherical segments of this basilica exemplified the Renaissance architecture that Giovanni wanted to establish in Florence. Moreover, Lorenzo Medici commissioned numerous Renaissance projects during his time in power, expanding parts of various libraries, and building a few for his own special collection of books, which catalyzed the development of humanism with other scholars such as Mirandola. Lorenzo’s love for art and architecture led to the building of the Uffizi, a pure symbol of

Renaissance architecture, by his relative Cosimo. The Florentine patronage of the Medici during the Renaissance augmented the architectural development from classical antiquity to the Renaissance form.

Following the Renaissance, the Baroque period proved significant in terms of political and cultural institutions exerting influence on the art and architecture associated with the period. First, in response to the Protestant Reformation spreading throughout Europe, the Catholic church employed Baroque artists and architects to glorify Catholicism in their works. In this respect, Baroque architecture was a product of religious factors. However, these works were heavily influenced by the patrons who commissioned them. For example, Pope Paul V assigned architect Carlo Maderno to work on an expansion of St. Peter's Basilica; while Maderno's work is certainly indicative of the Baroque style, it was heavily influenced by the patron Pope Paul V who established guidelines for the architecture.



Perhaps more powerful an image of Baroque architecture is the Palace of Versailles, built under the compelling reign of Louis XIV. Known as the "Sun King," Louis XIV created one of the most powerful absolute monarchies in European history. Accordingly, he commissioned the building of a glamorous estate to project the wealth and power of the France. The resulting palace contains strong Baroque imagery: extremely ornate decoration and heavy contrast. As it was built to please the patron Louis XIV, the palace is not so much indicative of the culture of the time but rather a powerful symbol of Louis' reign. It did, however, evolve into a symbol of French culture and the Baroque style.

It is important to keep in mind the process of architectural creation. Without funding for a project, even the most excellent design cannot come to fruition. The statement "money is power" was true throughout history, especially during the Renaissance and Baroque architectural eras. Although there are times when architectural design and patronage coincide - especially during the Renaissance - it is not always the case. The dual nature of architecture represents both the prevailing culture of a time period inculcated with the puissance of patronage.