Review: Review Article: Sorting Out Roman Architecture
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Source: *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Jul., 1998), pp. 614-617
Published by: Archaeological Institute of America
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/506405
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Sorting out Roman Architecture

WILLIAM L. MACDONALD

L'ARCHITECTURE ROMAINE DU DÉBUT DU IIIe SIÈCLE AV. J.-C. À LA FIN DU HAUT-EMPIRE 1: LES MONUMENTS PUBLICS, by *Pierre Gros*. (Les manuels d'art et d'archéologie antiques.) Pp. 503, color pls. 19, figs. 531, maps 7. Picard, Paris 1996. 650 FF. ISSN 1264-1723; ISBN 2-7084-0500-4.

THE FORUM OF TRAJAN IN ROME: A STUDY OF THE MONUMENTS 1–3, by *James E. Packer*, with architectural reconstructions by *Kevin Lee Sarring* and *James E. Packer*. Pp. xxx + 656, color pls. 18, pls. 251, figs. 157, folded maps and drawings 35, microfiche 414. University of California Press, Berkeley 1997. $650. ISBN 0520-07493-9.

L'architecture romaine, part of the series *Les manuels d'art et d'archéologie antiques*, is the best typological study yet of Roman public buildings (a second volume, on private structures, will follow). All five major parts of the book are divided into subsections, each dealing with a specific building type. Most begin with discussions of the origins, terminology, and characteristics of the type, but all contain substantial critical commentaries on instructive Italian and provincial examples that are the core of the work. Greek and Roman connections, classical ordinance, and the interpretation of relevant ancient texts are much to the fore. There are no footnotes, but topical bibliographies are part of each subsection, and citations of classical authors are indexed. Technology and hydraulics are excluded, except for a few bibliographical entries. The illustrations, mostly drawings, reinforce the text appropriately; a quarter of them are restorations.

Finding a way to organize a comprehensive study of Roman public architecture that does not mislead through mistaken emphases or illusory generalities is the subject of a judicious introduction. The frameworks adopted by Crema and Ward-Perkins are assessed and the grave difficulties of managing intersections of time, location, and cultural and technical differences defined; these difficulties are compounded by the substantial increase, in recent decades, in new knowledge and subjects, and by the identification and exploration of new problems. The author finds he cannot square the circle, that complete coverage of the entire story from the time of the kings through late antiquity is impossible, and for his organizing principle opts for a scheme expanded from Vitruvius, books I and III–IV, to be limited to the period between the mid-Republic and the end of the Severan dynasty, from Cosa to Lepcis Magna's monumental center and the Baths of Caracalla.

The framework of part 1 ("La définition des espaces et l'articulation urbaine") is typical. Its first subsection begins with the ideology of city walls and gates (*res sanctae* in *Dig.* I.8.1), attends to the literary evidence, then passes to a discussion of 30-odd examples, chiefly from France, Spain, and Italy, both Republican and Imperial. Sensitive to regional traditions, as he is throughout the book, the author produces a solid essay on the principles and evolution of the retainable exterior images of Roman cities and towns. The variety of earlier designs suggests that under the Empire, in some instances, the military features are quite sophisticated, largely through Hellenistic content (as in Rome's "Servian" wall, or the monumental gate at Side). Affective, symbolic architecture is integrated, for example, into the Rimini gate called the Arch of Augustus and the Porta Leoni of Verona. The second subsection, on honorific and triumphal arches, follows a similar pattern, but with extended chronological and geographic perimeters, and includes pages on monumental arches in the Greek-speaking provinces. The final subsection deals with porticos and quadriporticos in much the same fashion as the first two. A third of this concerns evidence from the eastern provinces; urban cryptoporticos are treated separately. The reader finishes part 1 with the sense that the author is prudent, alert to nuance and ever-present cross-influences, and very knowledgeable—no surprise to those familiar with his work.

Temples, forums, basilicas, and curias make up part 2 ("Les composantes du centre monumental," a third of the book). The confliction of the words *templum* and temple, the evolution of the familiar Imperial type and its vast posterity, and temple ordinance are emphasized; several pages feature lesser-known evidence from the Iberian peninsula and the Corinthian order in the Narbonnaise. Forums require less commentary, but three-temple western examples are singled out. Basilicas follow: their variants, the evolution of monumental expressions, and the great Ulpia's influence in the west. Curias appear in turn. Part 3 ("Les monuments du spectacle et du loisir") begins with a thorough canvass of theaters, from the first, Late Republican ones through Vitruvian theory and the theaters of Rome, to an account of them across the empire. The odeon (confusing term), is often, in Greece and in the east, a bouleuterion, a type studied here in conjunction with the *theatrum tectum*. Amphitheaters empire-wide receive thorough treatment augmented by sets of comparative plans, and are followed by libraries and auditoriums and seats of professional religious groups. Part 4 ("Les monuments des eaux") begins with public baths, their origin, terminology, and universality, then passes to fountains, nymphaea, and catchment sanctuaries, finishing with public latrines. Part 5 ("Les monuments du commerce et du stockage") covers markets, granaries, and warehouses.

The author's goals are reached and vindicated in this admirable work. The inherent deficiency of typological schemes—cutting or diluting formal and other connections among building types, because each is discussed separately—is, if not overcome, reduced by the inclusion of a wealth of comparative detail. Part 2, and to some extent part 1, together with regional excursions and comparative materials within types, intimate inter-type kinships.

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Many specialists will benefit from the author's knowledge of the regulated disposition of architectural parts and members and by his command of the extent of the influence of Greek architects, their practice and principles, on Roman professionals; his close attention to detail and difference and acute readings of the evidence can suggest a broad view of Roman public architecture as a whole. The structure of the book is traditional, the exposition frequently original; but readers may wish to keep in mind the weight and complexity of events over 500 years, and be alert to Roman innovation.

Slips are uncommon—a few misattributed or unattributed illustrations and incomplete index entries. But the book, sure to be used widely and often, lacks a topical index, unfortunate in so richly informative a work. Architects, varied treatments of the orders, and citations of buildings in places other than in their own subsections are among the subjects readers may wish to track; the "Summary" (of contents) is broken down into topical headings, helpful but insufficient. On the other hand, the bibliographies, totaling some 1,100 entries, are superior; few will have this command of recent studies. Superseded work is not cited; criticism is very rare. Naturally enough, Gallo-Roman examples stand out throughout the work, and this modernized coverage is welcome. Perhaps the Asiatic provinces are somewhat scanted, and a few African sites may be underemployed, for example, Cyrene, Antinoopolis, or Tipasa. Technology and hydraulics aside, were not the grand infrastructure works public monuments? Bridges (at Rome, for example, or Sufetula), dams (Subiaco, the Wadi Lebda), lighthouses (La Coruña), ports (Lepcis Magna, Caesarea Maritima), and aqueducts (Mérida, Aspendos) all were highly visible, internal elements of town life. Certainly Frontinus thought his aqueducts qualified (*Aq.* 1.16).

A third of the text of J.E. Packer's *The Forum of Trajan* covers past investigations and restorations; the balance deals with the monuments proper (the Basilica Ulpia in particular) and with architectural procedures and overall meaning. A prodigious documentation—archaeological, literary, pictorial, numismatic, and scholarly—extends to the figures and plates, a detailed catalogue of selected remnants (and concordances of varied numbering systems), 12 appendices, the microfiche, and a portfolio of new drawings. Revisionist interpretations of the evidence are illustrated in the text, a restored general plan of the whole, new restoration views of and in the Ulpia, the West Library, and the Forum proper and its east colonnade, and by an aerial restoration sketch of the entire complex frequently repeated for reference; all are based on restored plans and sections in the portfolio. The Temple of Trajan is, understandably, treated briefly, and the Markets are excluded.

Apollodorus's designs, based somewhat on those of earlier buildings, are found conservative and suitably imperial, and are roundly praised. The Ulpia is restored in a way that seems to depart from Roman architectural thinking (my observations are of a general character, for I do not control all the evidence; the author's conclusions, necessarily frequently qualified, can sometimes be difficult to assess because discussions of major topics and their documentation surface at multiple points). In this version, the building has solid structural walls only on the long north side and around the apses; columns do the work everywhere else. The two stories have no floor between them, so that the upper one is a kind of huge pergola, just columns and a roof. To this huge central space, defined by its surrounding columnar screens, the apses are attached somewhat awkwardly, though Roman architects joined central volumes with apsidal extensions smoothly in both plan and section. Here the apses properly are given half-conical wooden roofs (pitch and therefore height vary in the drawings) that might profitably be less steep; the lack of light could be remedied by windows in the upper transverse walls that face the second story end columns. The wide, empty spaces between these walls and the upper story columns emphasize the jarring semi-autonomy of the apses and produce an un-Roman roof silhouette seen also in some earlier restorations. This building would be open to all weather, so acoustical needs and relative comfort would seem to be abandoned. If, however, the restoration is in essence correct, it might explain why Hadrian often preferred to hold audience elsewhere (Dio Cass. 69.7.1).

The symmetrical Forum proper, its east colonnade, and the south wall with its arches, though not without problems, present fewer of them. Archaeological and numismatic evidence, combined with perceptive applications of evidence recorded long ago, underpin sensible restorations. The peristyle that once stood around the base of Trajan's Column, the base itself, and architectural elements of the Column are discussed in a concise section (its documentation an amplification of that in the text, in the fashion of the book) of an appendix; the historical role of the letterforms of the base inscription is not mentioned. Upon the excavated remains of the West Library a restoration is built up through the use of analogous evidence and the directives of the surviving fragments. Groin vaulting, with thermal windows, is supplied in order to maximize light sources. In the restoration drawings, staff lack ladders for their lofty *armaria*, and the entrance to the Library is closed by grilles, inadequate protection against the weather.

Someone—Rabirius?—looked at the Quirinal slope as it was being cut back to enlarge the level Forum area and proposed that the slope be terraced for shops and offices. The resulting Markets, the most elaborate example extant of Roman commercial architecture, await full publication. They were an integral part of the Forum; forums and daily business had long been joined. The Basilica Aemilia, cited here as one of the Ulpia's forerunners, had shops along its forum side and the Forum of Caesar included them. The august grandeur of Trajan's great work could not be unsettled by shops, so they were put on the hillside, together with city offices (one for the Forum administrator) in an inspired design spreading up and out from the Forum's east hemicycle. The resulting contrast of civil with popular forms displays almost the full range of High Imperial urban design, a most instructive event in the history of classical architecture.

Some tensions exist between the characterization of the Forum and its buildings as conservative and the proposed restoration of the Ulpia. A law court and municipal hall defined chiefly by colonnades is hardly traditional; it would set Apollodorus in a path as radical as that followed by Severus and Celer and Rabirius. And the Library, as re-

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stored, is thoroughly up to date. Throughout the complex architectural parts are familiar, and the classical ordinance, with its forms and formulas, is thoroughly anchored in the past; but columns do not make a building. The architectural carving is decribed as chaste, cleanly elegant, and un-Flavian, and based in part on that of the Forum of Augustus. These indeed are conservative elements, and if they did define architecture, then the Forum would be traditional. On the other hand, if the Ulpia restoration holds, it will be evidence of that burgeoning strain, in Imperial design, of departures, sometimes radical, from received practice.

The Forum and Ulpia colonnades, in a section on architecture as propaganda, are said to have evoked a sense of tranquillity and well-being, and traversing the Forum to have involved sudden confrontations with unanticipated goals and effects. But the orthogonality of the embedded Roman habit of crossing major axes at right angles with subordinate ones may have weakened these experiences somewhat. Earlier forums would instruct, and Trajan's could be readily understood from the Capitoline or the Markets.

There is much to ponder and to praise. The historical background, past restorations, and the views and drawings place Forum studies on a new footing. The analysis of the iconography is palmary (to achieve this and other goals, the author became a good archaeological detective); one learns many things, for example, that Trajan's image appeared 22 times, the Column excepted. Marbles—colors, sources, preparation, carving, usage—are a major subject, and the cumulative detail about sculptured elements constitutes a valuable essay on Trajanic practice. Proportion and scale—an essential topic often neglected—are kept well forward; it is easy to keep the Forum's great size in mind, because the figures in the restoration drawings are unusually effective. Discussions of design and construction methods are sober and useful. This ample publication will, like much of our work, be revised, but in the future will surely be seen as an essential step in the recovery of a remarkable creation.

To one whose interest in Roman architecture (sparked by Rivoira, Noack, Ashby, and Robertson) was expanded long ago by the brilliant lectures of Kenneth Conant and by George Hanfmann and Frank Brown, the flood of publications in recent years is extraordinary. The subject seemed fated to languish within the well-patrolled boundary of classical studies, little affected by sturdy advances in the history and interpretation of architecture; books and articles, mostly about buildings, were written mainly by classicists. Now non-classicists contribute, inherent meaning and affective qualities are widely recognized, and many young scholars are at work (nearly a quarter of all the papers given at the December 1997 annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America were on Roman architectural topics). Roman Greece is a respectable subject, and the lingering residue of conviction that Greek architecture is superior is contracting because of a growing nonjudgmental acceptance of differences. Our angle of vision expands steadily with studies of the reasons for the artistic, spatial, and functional character of Roman design; the appearance of essential works such as the Budé *Vitruve* and the *Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae* aids immeasurably.

Our two neoteric and well-documented books suggest in their separate ways the state and perhaps the direction of Roman architectural studies. The familiar, contending variants are all present—chronology, tradition, local practices, Greek and Hellenistic influence, and technical and stylistic change. Roman architects, responding to princely commissions and the needs and desires of those in prosperous cities and towns, extended the range of classical architecture in important ways and so, as time passed, changed its character noticeably. They provided solidly traditional buildings, but also devised new forms and effects, for example, in their remarkably successful bath buildings and familiar collocations of design elements, such as those on honorific arches or in municipal theaters; considerable modifications of taste and standards of suitability sustained these consequential events. If such richly plaited strains could be evaluated properly, brought to heel, and presented in logical, instructive order, we would have a working definition of Roman architecture. But it would be incomplete.

Roman architecture is like an old, very large but vigorous tree that has survived drought and neglect. Its deep roots are known through archaeology and its broad trunk through archaeological and architectural study. The branches, some very large and others of more recent growth, are rarely used as evidence of the nature and qualities of the tree, in spite of their total dependence on its roots. Yet Roman architecture may be the longest-lived visual language, save for that of the human body, in western culture, and the purely architectural reasons for this persistence should figure in any calculus of possible definitions, replacing the usual invocations of lost Roman glory and the belief that this architecture expresses the sway of an idealized polity. Architecture, through its unavoidable imagery, is like the other arts an affective one: the senses and memory are strongly engaged. Awareness of historical continuities and sensory factors is essential to the understanding of Roman architecture and the construction of an approximate definition of it; the scholarly tradition of authorial noninvolvement, in matters of judgment, should be reconsidered.

Three broad historical phases stand out: the seedbed Republican–Vitruvian period, the far-ranging works of the Empire (which shade off into early medieval architecture), and the omnipresent life of Roman images and design elements in western architecture after 1400. Something of this is reflected in the analytical treatment in Gros and Packer of the Basilica Ulpia's effect on Empire architects and post-Renaissance investigations of the building. In recognizing this continuity of Roman ideas in western architecture, one need not bog down in the marshlands of influence studies, for the buildings speak for themselves. In this view, Roman architecture—in its imagery, variety, and suitability—appears to be a solidly reassuring, primary standard of design. Understanding the purely architectural reasons why architects so often looked to it for inspiration and guidance should make its essence less obscure. Western architectural periods or styles are almost never hermetic, isolated, the Roman least of all.

About Vitruvius I hold a minority opinion expressed elsewhere. He is the touchstone of a particular phase—a

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crucial one—of classical architecture, but his brief does not extend to the inherent content of Roman architecture, which in any event lies mostly beyond his horizon. That Vitruvian rules and principles appear in subsequent architecture is natural enough, though in the larger view of the matter may not be all that common. That a good architect, structural matters aside, would not know how to space columns satisfyingly seems improbable, but we yearn for rules, and Vitruvius supplies them. Finding his arrangements or proportions in such firmly established types as official temples and municipal theaters is understandable, but his traditional prescriptions were being ignored by some even in his own day, and would be freely disregarded by others later on. But in time he was deified; his work was gospel. How could he be wrong? So he must always be reckoned with no matter what (I wonder what a book on architecture by Rabirius or Apollodorus, or even Hadrian, for that matter, would be like).

Typology, with its attractive, orderly method, is a useful way to organize Roman architecture, but it does not accommodate effectively the strong connections among building types, either in design or in urban configurations, essential to a definition of the whole; a typology is somewhat like an unshuffled deck of cards in its sealed package, suits and values in order, the animating combinations dormant. In handbooks, coverage alone comprises a kind of definition, but comprehensive formulations are rarely attempted.

It is as difficult to define Roman architecture as it is to define archaeology. But the buildings readily declare their Roman origin through bold, simple silhouettes produced by an elemental geometry. Delicacy and fussiness are very rare, and there is no striving for familiarity of the kind so common today; Roman buildings by contrast are reserved and formal in the social sense of the word. Public buildings in particular speak of permanence and stability through solid construction, their load-support relationships clearly stated in primary geometric shapes. Numerous broad-based isosceles triangles strongly imply balance, order, and shelter. The formal vocabulary is, after all, a quite limited one of basic units free of ambiguity. These appear in different sizes and proportions throughout almost all of the typology, variously deployed according to functional and symbolic requirements, thus defining the chief formal principle of Roman architecture by binding building types together in a fully characterized architectural style; in other words, it makes the typology rational. It may be that this consistency explains as much as any other factor the success of this architecture and its prolonged historical survival. It is, however, odd that so few identical public buildings are known; perhaps this is due to the inviting possibilities of combination inherent in the stock of basic shapes.

Architecture, inseparable from memory, carried the message of Rome's far-reaching suzerainty and its cultural basis into every town; its fusion of Greek with Roman forms made it well suited to this. It is not necessary to believe that the beholder consciously reflected on such things, for the mere presence of these buildings, like that of sculpture and coins, sufficed even for those who would never see Rome and those who knew no Latin to be fully aware of Roman purposes and authority. The orderly lines of monumental buildings and plazas, the symmetries of their plans, and the well-framed passages and entrances and other directive arrangements all reflected Roman organizational principles and the effective practical component of the Roman mentality. In this sense, the western afterlife of Roman architecture parallels in significant ways that of Latin literature and Roman law, but the subject awaits its scholars. Our temple-like banks and churches, with their centered entrance stairs flanked by duplicate podium blocks, or the judicial or legislative chambers gotten up like metropolitan Roman bath halls, are good evidence of the innate strengths of Roman architecture, the effectiveness and suitability of its symbolic images. This continuity, and the reliability of human reactions, primary testimony to stylistic persistence, are at least as useful, in sorting out Roman architecture, as the invaluable physical evidence of the prototypes.

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