



# Architecture

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Architecture, or the contemporary idea of architecture, applies to any kind of house. However, not every house in your neighborhood has a symbolic meaning. In this lesson, you will learn about:

- [1. Architecture As Symbolism](#)
- [2. Artists As Architects](#)
- [3. Interiors and Exteriors](#)
- [4. Architecture and Site Specificity](#)

## 1. Architecture As Symbolism



### BIG IDEA

You might ask yourself why so much **architecture** is included in art history survey courses. There are many ways that architecture establishes a relationship with other visual arts, which we will explore in this lesson. The first reason is that architecture has symbolic meaning. You might think of early religious architecture as a sort of holy mountain.



Artist unknown

*Great Ziggurat of Ur*

Tell el-Muqayyar, Dhi Qar Province, Iraq

c. 2050–2030 BCE, Third Dynasty of Ur

Mud brick with burnt brick facing

This is one of the earliest examples of architecture that is still in existence, the *Great Ziggurat of Ur*, located in present-day Iraq. Notice how the overall shape of this structure makes it resemble a mountain. There are also a series of staircases leading to the top of the ziggurat. High priests, who were the leaders of Sumerian city-states, would have organized processions to and from the top of the ziggurat, where a temple to the god of the city-state was located. This would have made it appear as if the priests were closer to the gods. This metaphor repeats throughout the history of architecture, with height or verticality symbolizing authority and/or proximity to the gods.

In 1985, Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq at that time, reconstructed parts of the Great Ziggurat of Ur, using bricks printed with his name.

- Why do you think he did this?
- What message was he trying to send?

#### IN CONTEXT

The image below is of the Great Pyramids of Giza, which were built as funerary tombs for the pharaohs, or kings, of ancient Egypt. Like ziggurats, the pyramids are also aligned with the cardinal directions and suggest an *axis mundi*, or a symbolic connection between the heavens and the earth. The pyramids would have had capstones either covered in gold, copper, or another shiny material that would have reflected the rays of the sun like a beacon or mirror in the desert, reinforcing the idea of the pyramid as a link to the divine.



Artist unknown

*Giza pyramid complex (the Great Pyramid, the Pyramid of Khafre, the Pyramid of Menkaure, and the Great Sphinx)*

**Giza, Greater Cairo, Egypt**

c.2600 – c.2500 BC, Early Dynastic Period to Late Period

White limestone

The next image is the Parthenon. This was built during the time of ancient Greece to honor the Greek goddess, Athena. Temples such as this were thought to be the physical home of the gods on Earth. The Parthenon's location, at the top of the Athenian Acropolis, reinforces this idea.



Ictinus and Callicrates

*Parthenon*

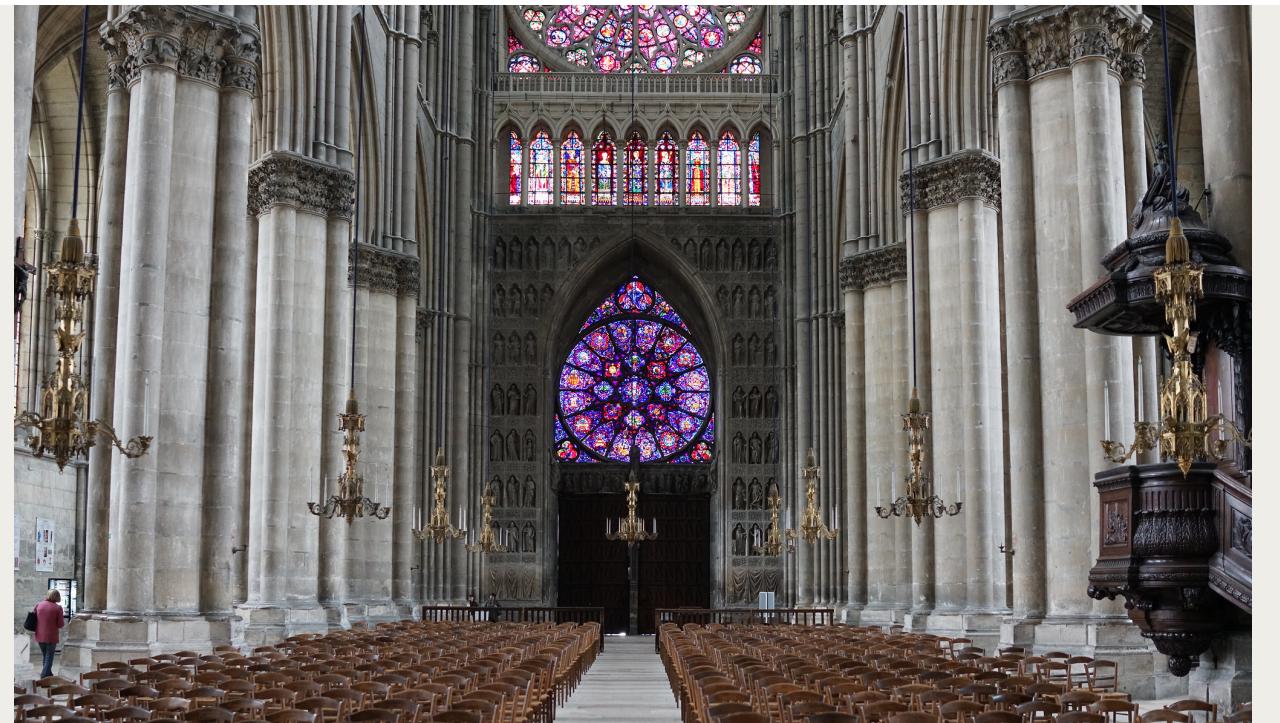
Athens, Greece

447 - 432 BC

Pentelic marble

The image below is of the interior of the cathedral at Reims, in France. The pointed arch associated with Gothic architecture allowed cathedrals to be built to soaring heights. This provided openings in the walls for stained glass windows and initiated a sort of contest between towns in France, with each one attempting to build a taller cathedral than the last. The cathedral at Beauvais collapsed in 1284, due to resonant vibrations from high winds.

Think about the symbolic value of the Gothic cathedral, how its soaring height suggests divinity and proximity to God, but also human prestige and talent. The town that built the tallest cathedral would have become famous in the area and received many visitors.



Jean d'Orbais, Jean-le-Loup, Gaucher of Reims, and Bernard de Soissons

*Notre-Dame de Reims (Reims Cathedral), interior*

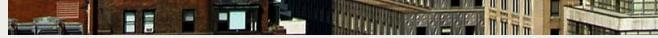
Reims, France

1211–1345

And finally, an image of modern architecture, the Chrysler Building in New York. For some, this structure might symbolize corporate power, prestige, and wealth.

- How does it do this?
- What references does it make to the symbolism of earlier architecture?
- Why has there been a competition to build the world's tallest building?
- What does it mean to do this in terms of symbolic value?
- What does it mean that the tallest building in the world is the Burj Khalifa, located in Dubai?





William Van Alen (1883 - 1954)

*Chrysler Building*

New York, New York, USA

1929 - 1930

Brick and steel



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Architecture

The art or practice of designing buildings.

## 2. Artists As Architects

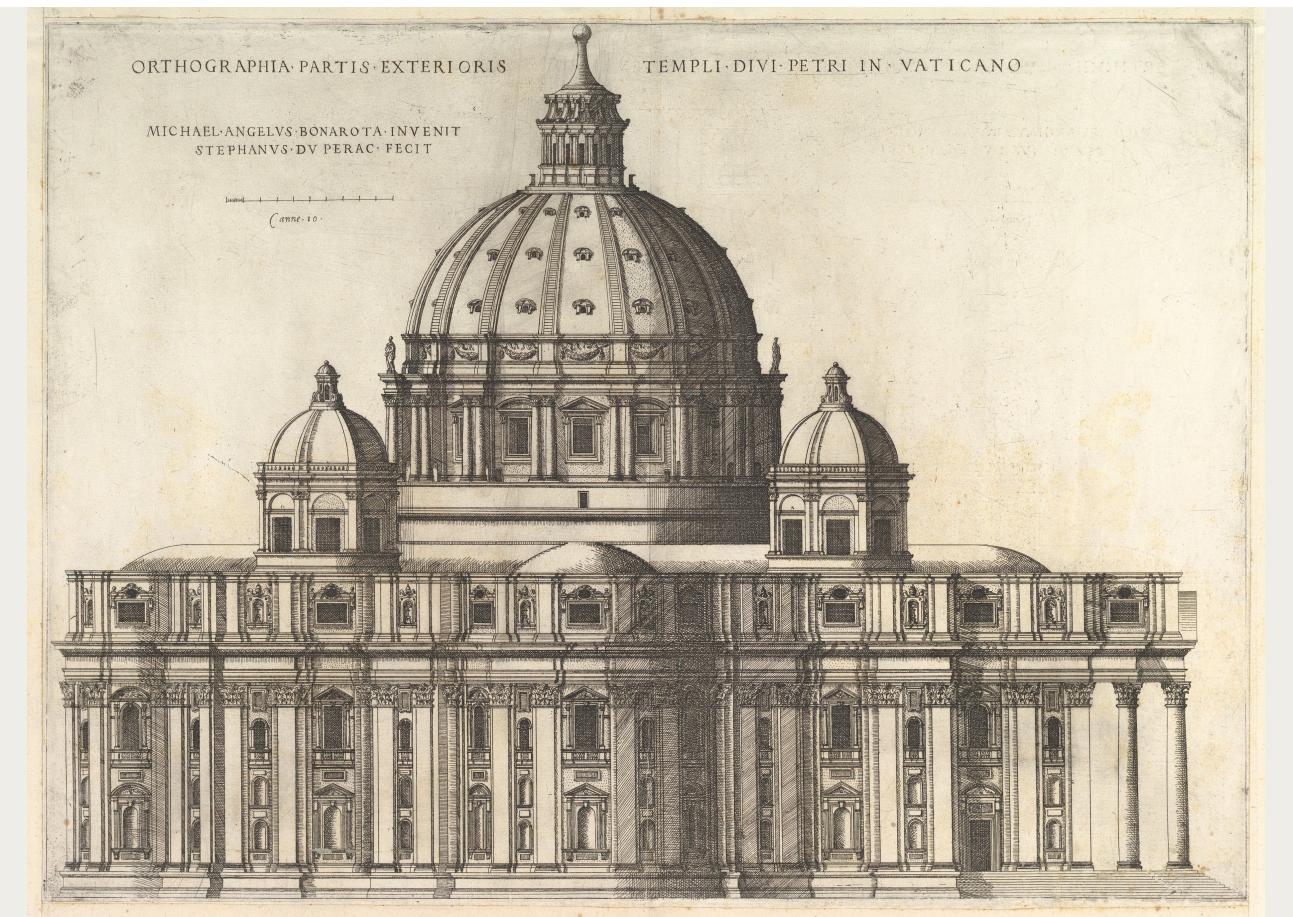
One of the many reasons why we study both art and architecture in art history survey classes is because in some cases, artists worked as architects, blurring the line between the two fields.

↗ EXAMPLE During the Italian Renaissance, both Michelangelo and Brunelleschi worked as architects.

Michelangelo designed the floor plan for St. Peter's, improving on designs by Bramante and Raphael.

Brunelleschi, who had no previous training as an architect, created the design for the dome at the cathedral of Florence, which is the largest masonry dome in the world. His main innovation consisted of creating a double-shelled dome that distributed its weight evenly.

#### IN CONTEXT



**Etienne DuPérac (1520 –1607)**

*Elevation Showing the Exterior of Saint Peter's Basilica from the South as Conceived by Michelangelo, from Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae*

**1569**

**Engraving**



Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 - 1446)

*Dome of Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral (aka. Brunelleschi's dome)*

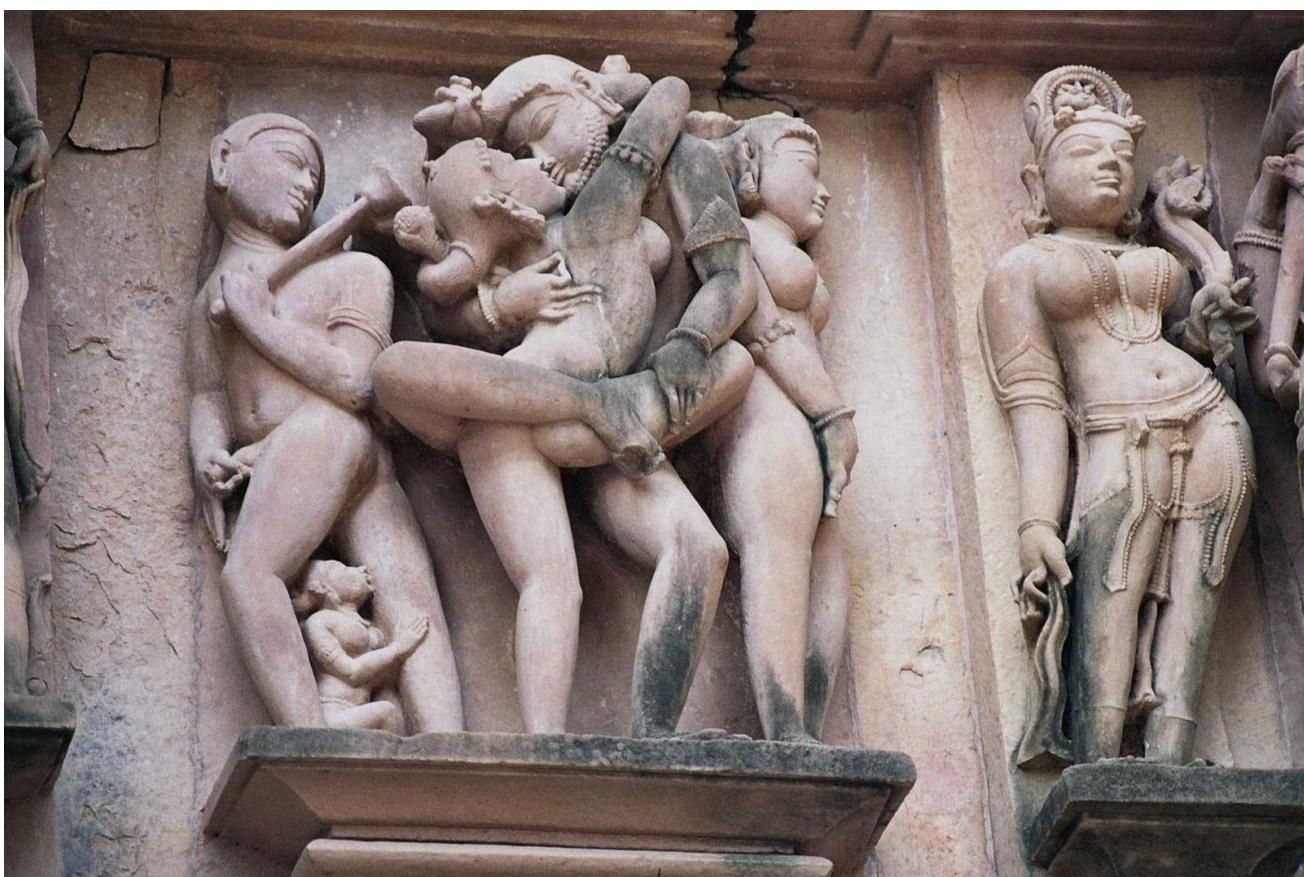
Florence, Italy

1420 - 1436

Stone, brick, and white marble

### 3. Interiors and Exteriors

External ornamentation of architecture often represents a theme and contributes to the overall symbolism the architecture portrays. Internal spaces are carefully considered in order to create a cohesive space that supports and enhances the aesthetics of the building.



Artist unknown

*Mithuna from the Lakshmana temple*

Khajurāho, Madhya Pradesh, India

c. 930 – c. 950 CE

The function of this imagery has been debated, but there is agreement that its purpose was not pornographic. Rather, these sculptures depicted figures generating cosmic energy through their activities so that the temple would be protected.

Inside Hindu temples is a central room called a *garba griha*, or womb room. It is very small, with just enough space for a couple of people to fit. The purpose of this space is for worshippers to show their devotion by leaving offerings and doing acts of *puja*, or devotion, in front of the image of the deity.



Artist unknown

*Garbhagriha from the Lakshmana temple*

Khajurāho, Madhya Pradesh, India

c. 930 – c. 950 CE

As you look at the Lakshmana Temple at Khajuraho and other sites, you might think about how sculptural elements on the interior and exterior of buildings work together to create a stylistically cohesive design, even though different designers, architects, and sculptors may have created these works over a long period of time. You might also consider how the exterior sculpture has a different purpose and is experienced differently from the interior.

## 4. Architecture and Site Specificity

**Site specificity** refers to how some architecture can be appreciated only in the surrounding environment in which it was built. In other words, to move it or recreate it elsewhere would diminish the effect. Sometimes the intention is to create a piece of architecture where the building appears to emerge from its environment, rather than being simply plopped into the environment. In this case, to remove it from that environment would really diminish or defeat the purpose of building it in the first place.

↗ EXAMPLE The image below is of the external architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Fallingwater*. This is a perfect example of site specificity. The slabs of concrete, or cantilevers, echo the forms of the rock slabs on which the house is located. The exterior also uses decorative stone taken from the same site. For these reasons, this house is site-specific and could not be located anywhere else.



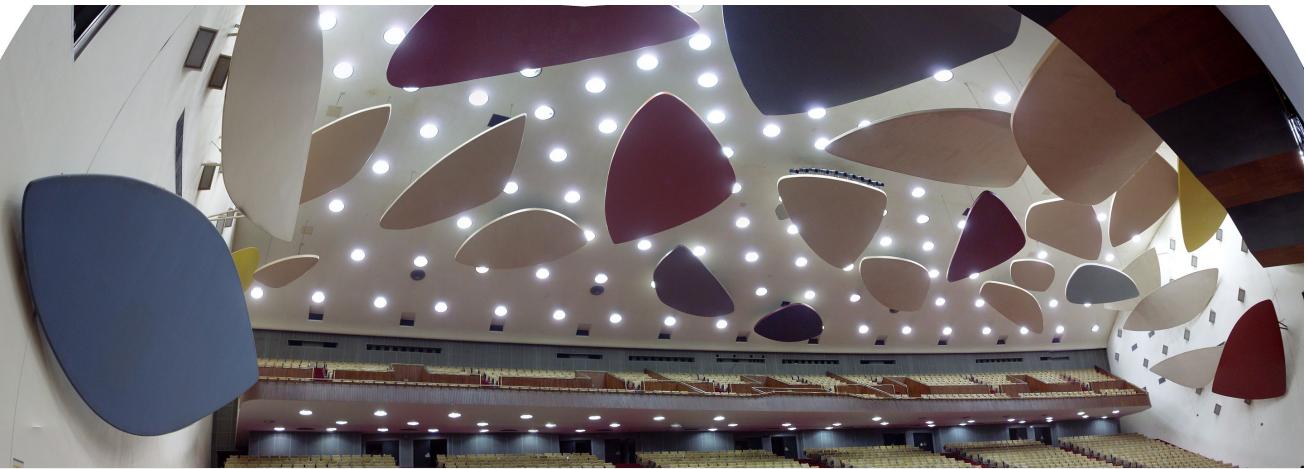
Frank Lloyd Wright (1867 - 1959), William Wesley Peters (1912 - 1991)

*Fallingwater*

Mill Run, Pennsylvania, USA

1935 -1964

During the 1950s, the president of Venezuela decided to redesign the entire campus of the Central University of Venezuela, which needed to accommodate its increasing enrollment. The architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva created modernist designs for buildings throughout the campus. One was the concert hall. Its *Aula Magna*, or Great Hall, contained sculptures by Alexander Calder, which would increase the acoustic qualities in the hall. These works were created specifically for the *Aula Magna* and the university and in this sense are also site-specific:



Alexander Calder (1898 - 1976)

*Floating Clouds, from the interior of the Aula Magna*

Central University of Venezuela, Caracas, Venezuela

1953

Paint on panelled wood



## TERM TO KNOW

### Site Specificity

When the relationship between a work of art or architecture is so strong that it would be impossible to move or reconstruct that object in another location.



## SUMMARY

Examples of architecture are all around us. In this lesson, you learned about **architecture as symbolism** and how it can represent more than just its physical features. Many times, architecture is inspired by other visual artists. Renaissance architecture can be seen in examples such as the work of Michelangelo and Brunelleschi, two Renaissance **artists that crossed over into architecture**.

**Exteriors and interiors** and the differences in the architecture of the two were covered in this lesson. External ornamentation of architecture often represents a theme, and internal spaces are carefully considered to create a cohesive space.

Finally, at times it is impossible to move or reconstruct a work of art or architecture without diminishing the effect. This is called **site specificity**, and you looked at the example of Fallingwater, by Frank Lloyd Wright, in this lesson.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Architecture

The art or practice of designing buildings.

### Site Specificity

When the relationship between a work of art or architecture is so strong that it would be impossible to move or reconstruct that object in another location.