Books

Frank Sear
*Roman Theatres: An Architectural Study*

Katherine E. Welch
*The Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum*

Methodologically these two books on the Roman architecture of spectacle have little in common. Frank Sear’s volume, intended as a reference work, is a comprehensive catalog of an architectural type with commentary; Katherine E. Welch’s is a critical inquiry into the historical development of a form (with a much shorter catalog).

Encyclopedic, obsessively researched, crammed with statistics and facts, *Roman Theatres* is Sear’s magnum opus. Conceived in the ultr tradi tional manner of a European Habilitationsschrift, this volume is built to last. It is heartening to see a British university press produce it, whatever the price. Most Anglophone presses have abandoned such lavish archaeological productions, though they remain as indispensable to practitioners as they are unprofitable to the publishers.

At this price the book is plainly targeted at research libraries, many of which will face a dilemma. Now there are two encyclopedic references on ancient theaters available, both published within the last fifteen years.¹ What if a library already has the comparably expensive three-volume *Teatri greci e romani*? (The scope of both works is virtually identical, despite the putatively more inclusive “greci” alongside “romani.”) The 1994 set, to which Sear contributed an essay, remains an excellent reference of first resort. It has parallel texts in four languages, including English, and its introductory chapters are usefully panoramic. Sear’s advantages are his richer and more inclusive introductory chapters, a more definitive catalog, and more illustrations. But for the coherence of its essays and ease of use, the old set is more than adequate.

The most interesting features of monumental surveys of this kind are often their introductory essays, which ideally not only present a general history of the form but also reduce the author’s cumulative erudition to trenchant synthesis and analysis. On that score, Sear’s book is generous in scope (there are many topical chapters) but disappointing in substance. Although he has many ideas to impart, particularly on financing and construction costs, originality is neither his objective nor his muse. He is mostly content to organize, rather than to critique, the substantial body of scholarship applied to theaters around the Roman world. His stated goal is to present theaters descriptively as built forms, not critically as social or intellectual artifacts. The reader will find no broad excursus on the theater’s place in ancient society, or even on the causes of its formal development. On this score, the 1994 set is rather more satisfying. What one gets instead is a minute dissection of the type by geography, components, and forms. Sear’s fondness for classification is often appropriate, but it also can get out of hand. There are times when the proliferation of subheadings and chapter divisions seems to substitute for an organizing idea or a cohesive argument. Even the catalog is excessively subdivided: Italian towns are sequestered among their ancient regiones, and Gaul too is divided into its parts. Who is served by such fuzzy taxonomies?

Narrative is not altogether lacking, however. One chapter in particular, on the theaters of Rome, will be read widely, if more for its informational value than for its ideas. But in most cases when a topic calls for deeper analysis, Sear retreats into chaste detachment, preferring to enumerate examples of a phenomenon rather than interrogate the phenomenon itself. Take, for example, his treatment of acoustic devices in theaters. These he covers with reportorial diligence, but he fails to inquire how amphorae or dolia embedded in walls could possibly enhance the acoustics of a theater. Perhaps such restraint is appropriate. For any scholar who wants to probe this enticing corner of theater lore—or many others—every archaeological instance (real or imagined) and every scrap of bibliography are made available without bias. Sear’s editorial reserve, his distaste for reductionism of any kind, may rankle the reader looking for fewer facts and more meaning, but they suit his primary purpose.

Welch’s book, by contrast, is a concise polemical history. Following book-length studies on Roman amphitheaters by Jean-Claude Golvin and David Lee Bomgardner, it aims not to rewrite them but in effect to challenge certain assumptions they advance (often reinforced by historians) about the formal development of the enclosed arena.² For this Welch must be as much a social as an
architectural historian. Somewhat unusually for this topic, she advances a strong argument while spurning an ideology. At first blush an anti-ideology might seem inimical to a polemical stance, but this is not so. No aspect of Roman historiography has been more ideological than the treatment of blood spectacle. Old ideologies have departed, only to give way to aggressive new ideologies. Presumptions of barbarism have yielded to claims for the civic usefulness of gladiatorial combat, or of its compensatory power of collective expiation. Welch successfully challenges these modern dogmas with facts at hand; but ultimately she leaves the final cause of Roman spectacle to others. Her interest, in Aristotelian terms, is the formal cause of the edifice enclosing it. What historical circumstances led to the development of an oval grandstand surrounding an oblong arena? What circumstances determined its approximate size and shape for posterity? And what subsequent determinants charged it with ideological symbolism?

Whatever the origins of gladiatorial combat (and Romans themselves disagreed sharply about this), Welch is convinced that the architectural form to accommodate it was developed in Rome. The term maenianum, which originated in Rome, designated a kind of cantilevered wooden balcony projecting from buildings around the forum, where the city’s early spectacles were held. By the late republic its plural had become the standard word for the grandstand of an amphitheater. Another architectural term possibly originating in Rome is spectacula, referring in general to the temporary wooden amphitheaters built for spectacles in the forum. It reappears in the dedicatory inscription of the first known permanent amphitheater in Pompeii circa 75 BCE.

A critical passage in Plutarch indicates that a curved seating structure was erected in the forum in 123 BCE, which the magistrates were renting out to the public. Gaius Gracchus had it removed so that the plebs could watch the combat for free. Welch correctly recognizes this passage’s importance as a milestone in the amphitheater’s formal development; but she could take her conclusions even further. The curved bleachers shared one feature with traditional cantilevered maeniana: they served the profit motive. Plutarch’s passage may suggest that the new, freestanding architectural form, whose very name had migrated from the rented balconies, was an outgrowth of patrician schemes to recoup the expenses of the games they sponsored.

Scholars have marveled at the seeming maturity of the earliest known amphitheater, built a half century later in Pompeii. Welch is less impressed; she sees a simple, utilitarian structure defined by a depression and its surrounding embankments, having only the simplest of vaulted armatures. Lacking a pronounced style, the form emphasizes a utilitarian function. It would seem obvious that this and slightly later amphitheaters in Italy owe a debt to the architecture of theaters and the regional ekklesiasteria or comitia (assemblies) that often comprised a conical depression in the surrounding embankment. Welch minimizes their influence, contending that the more direct formal prototype came from the wooden grandstands in the Forum Romanum. It is true that Greek ekklesiasteria in Italy had been obliterated long before the birth of the permanent amphitheater; but the same cannot be said of their Roman equivalents, the comitia. Paestum’s circular comitium provides the most obvious known example near Pompeii; even Rome’s famous comitium was circular in this period and surely was known to architects around Italy. I would also suggest that the Pompeian amphitheater has close formal analogues in several slightly earlier Roman theaters in Italy: those at Bononia (Bologna), Cales, and Teanum, for example. Bononia’s theater in particular, which had a low outer blind arcade in opus incertum, is strikingly analogous. (There is no better resource for finding such comparanda than Sear’s Roman Theatres.) By acknowledging an important role of the theater and comitium in the formulation of the permanent amphitheater, Welch would not have weakened her fundamental plea for a point of origin in the Forum Romanum. It is the elongated form and approximate dimensions of the arena and seating areas, more than the design of the grandstand, that bespeak a specific historical prototype.

Probably the first arena to be built up from ground level, the Amphitheater of Statilius Taurus is the next milestone in Welch’s narrative. Virtually obliterated from the archaeological record (only a few minor fragments have been identified), this edifice, built in early Augustan Rome near the Tiber and destroyed in the fire of 64 CE, has unjustly languished in obscurity. Welch retrieves it with a skillful mix of fact and educated conjecture. Not only was Statilius’s building, with its outer columnar arcades, probably the first of its kind to express a monumental affect, but the choice of columnar order at ground level—the Tuscan—drew a subtle distinction between its Italian roots and the more directly Greek claims on theaters—which, significantly in Rome, seem to have favored the Doric order in their lower registers. It provides the missing link, Welch suggests, between the earlier, unadorned amphitheaters and later filiations such as the Flavian amphitheater at Capua and the Colosseum, which likewise adopted the Tuscan identity symbol.

From here Welch launches a new and compelling argument. Scholars often presume, following Martial, that the Colosseum was introduced as a kind of populist antidote to Nero’s tyranny, returning to ordinary Romans that which Nero had stolen from them—with interest. She turns this commonplace on its head, or at least sideways: Nero, she observes, was far more of a populist than his successors. What the Flavians offered was a public monument that, far from opening up forbidden delights to a deprived public, implicitly repudiated Nero’s freewheeling, undisciplined generosity to the poor. Offered in its place was a return from Hellenophile decadence to rigid Roman values. Whereas Nero probably had opened much of the Domus Aurea, his villa within the city, to
Roger B. Ulrich

**Roman Woodworking**


In *Roman Woodworking*, Roger B. Ulrich has produced an important resource for scholars of the ancient world, a resource richer than its conventional size and simple title imply. Ulrich brings to front and center a material whose known importance has not received adequate attention. Wood was a basic material used in every aspect of ancient life, from the mundane source for firewood to the support for large structures, such as bridges and amphitheaters. Because wood has left little trace in the material record, it has been largely ignored, and Ulrich undertakes to show the importance of the material in all aspects of Roman life.

In many respects *Roman Woodworking* is a hybrid, a cross between a traditional handbook and a historical narrative. Thirteen chapters comprise two-thirds of the book while the last third contains a detailed glossary, a useful appendix, and an extensive bibliography and index. The uneven quantity and quality of the evidence leads to a wide variation in the length and depth of discussion in each chapter.

In chapter one Ulrich draws on direct and indirect evidence to build a picture of the importance of wood in the ancient Roman world. Direct evidence in the form of artifacts is understandably scanty, but Ulrich includes evidence that has come to light relatively recently in places, such as Britain, where conditions of preservation have been favorable. Indirect evidence includes imprints of wood in the volcanic ash of Campanian sites, in concrete foundations and in postholes in the ground, and depictions of wooden objects, structures, and woodworking tools in reliefs and paintings. Ulrich relies on literary and epigraphic evidence in his search for more precise definitions, and he gives substantial descriptions of tools, procedures, and form. Precision is not always possible, given the ambiguous application of terms by ancient authors.

Unlike the traditional handbooks that inspired him, Ulrich’s narrative in chapter two begins with people rather than trees or forests. Woodworkers were skilled craftsmen who were generally Greek freedmen and formed part of a large and productive class with limited rights in Roman society. The study of this class is an interesting and topical field in Roman social history. At six pages, this chapter on the Roman woodworker is one of the shortest, serving as a quick introduction to the social status of the woodworker with regard to the elites and his peers. This brief overview begs for expansion into a substantial social study of the woodworker and his profession. Although Ulrich finds no documentation of professional guilds for the craft, he does emphasize the sense of pride among craftsmen in general and woodworkers in particular.

The following two chapters deal with the woodworkers’ tools and craftsmanship. Both are well illustrated. A catalog of tools relies heavily on representations, with the few actual examples coming mainly from sites in Britain. Alphabetically arranged according to their English names, the entries on tools provide a description of form and function as well as a historical discussion of the tool and related scholarship. The associated chapter on joints reveals the carpenters’ high degree of craftsmanship. It is the most technical of the chapters.

Chapters five through nine, the core of the book, deal with the structural use of wood. Discussions of foundations, framing and walls, wooden flooring, roofing and ceilings, and interior woodworking proceed in a logical sequence. Wood was used to form concrete foundations, but Ulrich focuses on its use as a foundation in the form of sleeper beams or piles. He includes the first bridge over the Tiber, the Pons Sublicius, and Julius Caesar’s wooden bridge over the Rhine, both of which are known only through literary references. The debate surrounding the hypothetical reconstructions of the Rhine Bridge and problems of terminology are discussed but naturally remain unresolved. Rejecting a developmental catego-

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**Notes**
