lines appear in The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 25: The American Hotel, edited by Molly W. Berger in 2005. Also, hotel networks in major individual cities might be valuably studied, as in Robert Stern’s and his co-authors’ volumes on New York City’s architecture. Perhaps an ideal historiography would link specifically architectural analysis with consideration of the mix of theoretical, political, and social-historical issues found in Hotel.


In his introduction, Edmund Thomas defines architectural “monumentality” (1–14). While moderns take the term to mean “either that the building is physically imposing or that it is a memorial of the past” (4), for the Romans of the age of the Antonines (AD 98–193) a monumen-tum had other important qualities. It was durable; it perpetuated the name of a builder or patron; its character exceeded ordinary utility; it recalled and inculcated social norms; it represented and advanced the social ambitions of subjects and emperors. The large scale, rare and expensive foreign colored marbles, and gilding and gilded bronze of such buildings embodied the wealth and success of Antonine society. Amazing and visually edifying their visitors, these monuments, with their rational and elevated character, at once sacred and profane, were, for their builders, connected with the gods and with the very structure of the universe. Thomas’s characterizations of these Antonine structures, particularly those in Asia Minor, attempt to demonstrate how their designers attained these lofty goals in three dimensions.

Part one, “Monumental Form,” considers the way in which Romans conceived a structure. Design and building were a form of intellectual play, but particular features marked the finished product as monumental. Long connected in the Greek world with temples, the columnar orders stood for divinity and later, since their materials and construction were expensive, for the power of the state. Used for honorary monuments from the late second century BC on, arches were associated with military achievement. The triangular pediment, derived from temples, sanctified other buildings (the house of Julius Caesar, for example). Size and height demanded attention, marking a building as exceptional. In the hands of a Roman builder, edificatio, or the combination and use of such potent symbols, was ludic, a “game”—and a social competition.

For the wealthy private patron, domestic architecture symbolized social standing. The signs of high social rank—colonnades, mosaics, and foreign mar-bles—reflected the decor of state buildings, and their beauty—like the physical beauty of an individual—indicated moral excellence. In public buildings—temples, theaters, basilicas, and baths—size, complexity, fine workmanship, imported marb-les, and statues of the gods and emperors embellished richly decorated spaces. Incorporating arresting views, these structures promoted the social advancement of their patrons, serving as visual proofs of personal worth, taste, vast wealth, social position, and imperial connections. And the repetition of Roman models—sometimes despite local opposition—testified to the patron’s familiarity with the latest architectural innovations in the capital and expressed his loyalty to the empire.

Architects designed buildings and directed their construction, but there was no organized architectural profession. In the Greek East, an architect was at times a local magistrate, a cult member, a military man, or even, occasionally, a professional architect. In the West, architects were normally professionals, but they came from various classes. Some were slaves or freedmen. Others, freeborn, but perhaps of lower social standing, were called only “builders” and had local careers. Yet, as Vitruvius indicates, many architects were well-educated professionals. Viewing design as a path to social advancement, they probably traveled widely and were acquainted with the most famous designs of their day. Some were as well known as the great architects of the Hellenistic age whose names appeared in Roman architectural treatises of the first century BC.

Thomas’s part two, “Monuments of City and Empire,” begins with an examination of the character of the Antonine city. Walls established its boundaries; they expressed its form; they established and symbolized its identity. Gates—such as the Gate of Hadrian at Antalya (Attalia), Turkey and the Porta Nigra in Trier—were major public monuments. Inside the walls, the enormous crowds and vast
buildings overawed the inexperienced visitor. But colonnaded boulevards, broken by columnar monuments at intersections and public squares, organized and lighted these spaces. Facilitating travel and communication, they divided the city into smaller quarters and neighborhoods. These areas were dominated by theaters, amphitheaters, baths, fora, and arches, complex and diverse structures that configured the overpowering urban environment into picturesque views that determined its character and individuality. Some buildings were public; some had public façades with private interiors. The most famous structures impressed by their size, decoration, and capacity for vast crowds—like Rome’s Colosseum or imperial baths.

Representing local taste, wealth, and individuality, provincial buildings also had to represent the empire. The cities of the wealthiest provinces (like Asia Minor) competed to erect large, elaborately configured monuments. Demonstrating the wealth of a city, they also defined its image and imperial status as a provincial capital, a meeting place for provincial representatives, or the seat of an imperial temple.

In the provinces, imperial architecture represented Rome and the stability of its artificially structured reigning dynasty, but, despite its superficial uniformity, this was not a single imperial style imposed by outsiders. Eagerly accepting new forms, the provincials, anxious to establish publically their honor and that of their families, erected buildings as signs of their loyalty and their appreciation of sophisticated style. Local structural details, accepted by imperial architects, were often widely distributed to other provinces. The emperors themselves frequently supported provincial construction. Sometimes they made large imperial donations, and in other cases, mostly in the early second century AD, curatores rei publicae (imperial curators) represented their interests. Subsequently, local governors handled imperial business, giving permission to construct public buildings and ensuring that the original donors or their heirs fulfilled their promises.

Part three, “Monuments and Memory,” begins by considering the relationship of classical monuments to the Greek past. These structures memorialized the deceased and their virtues, they recalled momentous events like victories, and they transmitted the names and powers of the gods. They “gave an exemplary status to events and persons of the past” (167). By attracting attention and delivering messages through physical grandeur, Roman monuments memorialized the worth of great individuals and their families. Frequently rebuilt, the reconstituted structures copied the form of the originals while updating them; always old but simultaneously new, they inherited the sites and missions of their predecessors. Large and magnificently decorated, the contemporary structures validated, equalled, and surpassed their predecessors. Their builders expected them to last forever, and their size ensured they could never be replaced.

In part four, “Responses to Monuments,” Thomas characterizes the Roman approach to architecture as visual and subjective, expressed according to Aristotelian criteria: shape, size, number, and movement. Natural materials were successfully worked into new forms while conventional geometrical elements—the rounded niche, the cross-vault, the dome—shaped its design. Exceeding an ordinary scale, the proportion (symmetria) of its parts distinguished its size. Numerical structure underlay the design, defining its measurements and the number of its parts. Movement entailed varied viewing positions around the exterior or within a building, diverse views along the structure’s central axis, observation of the rhythms of its colonnades, and comprehension of the subtle shifting effects of its colored paintings and polychromatic marbles. Such views produced strong feelings: wonder, awe, even shock. The educated expressed their reactions in prose that described the visual effects of buildings and the moral concepts that they embodied.

In his conclusion, Thomas reviews the well-defined principles that conditioned Roman attitudes toward architecture in the age of the Antonines. To compete with past works, their monuments required size, but they also had to exhibit beauty and brilliance. Thus they needed light, space, and multicolored marbles. Chosen for their cultural associations, the various columnar orders, different in size and decoration, might all appear in a single structure. Other features supplemented them: vaults, domes, sculpture, paintings, mosaic, expensive imported marbles, and gilding. However, if not combined with great size, prominent site, and formal layout to produce a memorable architectural design, these features might seem mere ornament.

Thomas’s work is a sign of a new maturity in the study of Roman architecture. During the twentieth century most scholars writing in English were preoccupied with describing and evaluating individual monuments (with the exception of William MacDonald’s The Architecture of the Roman Empire, II. An Urban Reappraisal [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986]); they did not attempt more than archaeological reports, short articles, and brief descriptions of individual sites in general texts. In the early twenty-first century, however, familiarity with secondary studies and wide-ranging travels have acquainted a notably larger group of students of Roman architecture relatively well with monuments in all parts of the Roman world (including Eastern Europe, for the first time since World War II). Like Thomas, they can now begin to evaluate these materials.

Thomas’s work, however, has some important omissions. His concentration on Asia Minor restricts his discussion to provincial cities, and thus, with some exceptions, he ignores the major architecture of Rome and central Italy. Few, however, have related literary sources to extant buildings so successfully. His connections illuminate and convince. They explain the ambitious intellectual constructs that underlay eastern Roman buildings of the second century AD in satisfying new ways. Despite some omissions, he has given us a new approach to understanding the motives and expectations of Roman imperial builders.

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