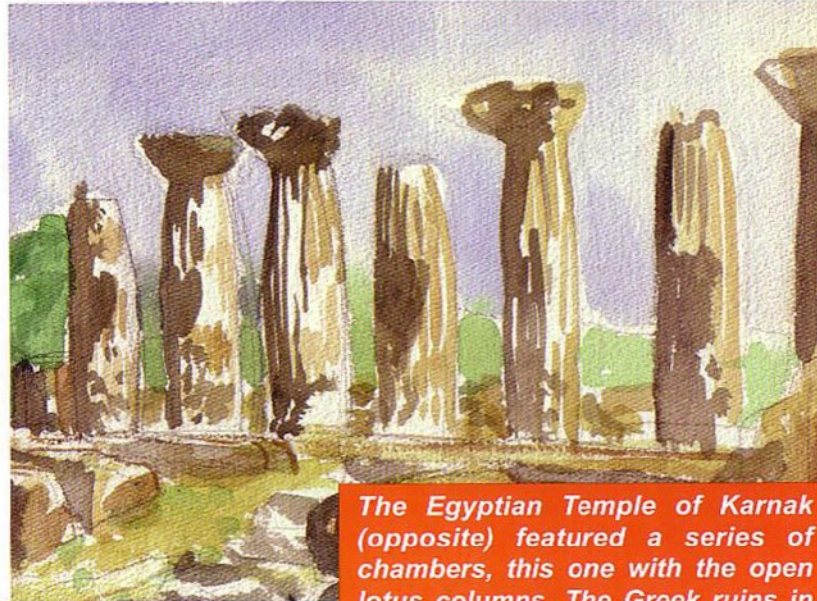


Architects & History

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The Egyptian Temple of Karnak (opposite) featured a series of chambers, this one with the open lotus columns. The Greek ruins in Agrigento, Italy (above) had Doric capitals that borrowed heavily from the open lotus columns. Moderns like Marcel Breuer with his Whitney Museum in NYC (far opposite), were not concerned with traditional forms or systems of order.

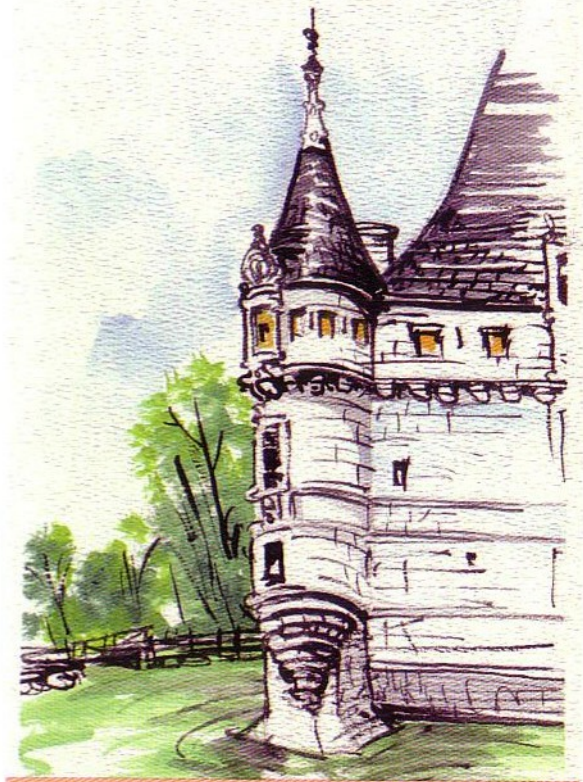
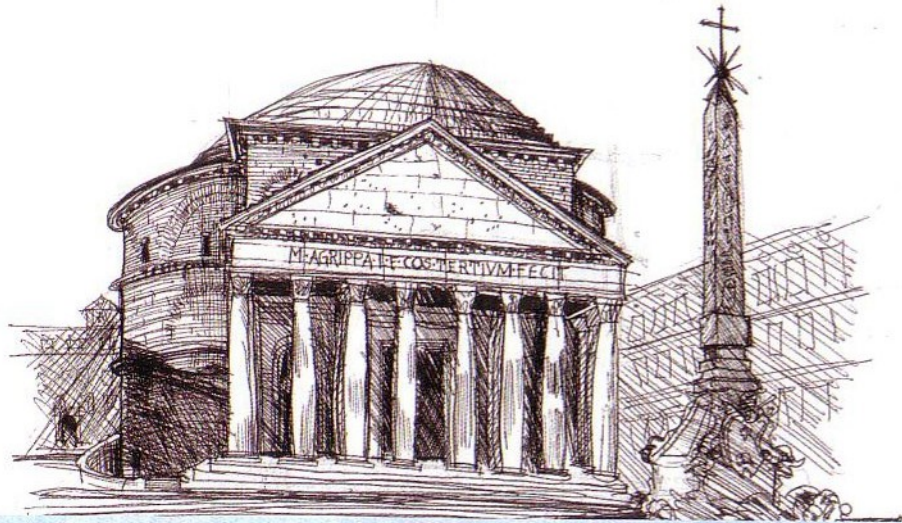
A brief history of western architecture:

The Egyptians started it.

The Greeks perfected it.

And every one else has copied it since (with the exception of some high Gothic and the Moderns).

The Romans, who I left out of my summation, were great technical innovators, and they knew a good thing when they saw it. As they conquered and pillaged Greek colonies, they said to themselves, "Hey, this is good stuff." They took Greek motifs and placed them everywhere. Greek style with Roman engineering has been a living design force for thousands of years.



A romp through Western Architecture History: The Pantheon in Rome (above left); Azay Le Rideau in the Loire Valley (above) and Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame du Haut Ronchamps (left) rendered in gingerbread complete with gingerbread modular man. (Apparently, I had some free time once.)



In NYC the Empire State Building (above) looms over historic styled buildings.

In addition to Frank Montana, for me, the other inspiring architecture educators at Notre Dame at the time included Steve Hurtt, Tom Neff, Norman Crowe, Judith diMeo, Jaime & Esme Bealta, and Kenneth Featherstone.

High Gothic architecture concerned itself with Christian spirituality, so it was by intent less earthly. It shunned rigid symmetry and had strict proportions and a numerology that did not match the Greek's math. I say High Gothic because artifacts of its style—without the overall proportion system—were quickly copied, even added to late Romanesque churches. One can find Gothic elements stuck on all sorts of buildings as it went from high vision to popular fashion.

During the Modern era of architecture (which is over 100 years old and I would prefer to call "reductionism"), there was a strong movement that echoed the much quoted Henry Ford proclamation that "History is Bunk." In ***Towards a New Architecture***, Le Corbusier declared that, "Rome is the damnation of the half-educated. To send an architecture student to Rome is to cripple them for life."

I studied in Rome as a student. It was mandatory at my college, The University of Notre Dame, and cost no more than normal tuition. It was a great opportunity for a kid who otherwise couldn't afford it. The program was innovative and created

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by a great architect and great architecture educator, Frank Montana.

Because my university at the time had no school of thought, our professors argued about history and style in front of us. Strong minded and strong willed they pleaded their case on what is good architecture: moderns against the beaux arts classics; post moderns against the de-constructivists. Within this din was a great opportunity to learn about all styles and see the ideas tested.

So I am an architectural mutt, devoid of a single purebred theory, but full of wonder of all styles of architecture. I can like Le Corbusier and the Pantheon.

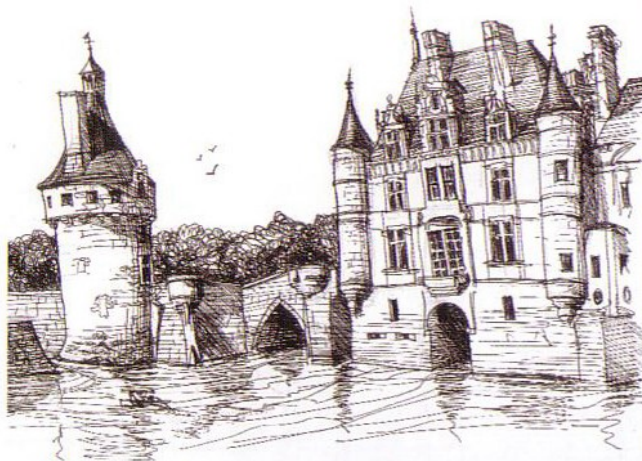
I am an architectural mutt





FUN WITH HISTORY

This pool garden (all images left) was created when we removed the greenhouse enclosure which made the air heavy with chlorine. While the existing house was inspired by a French Renaissance style, the Offenhardt family preferred the Provençal style of architecture. (I suggested sending the architect to France for three months to study the style, but instead I worked from books.) Since the Provence style was rougher, we played with a historic precedent. Many Châteaux like Chenonceau (opposite right) were fancy homes built on the ruins of fortresses. They were rough at the base and refined at the top. For this pool garden we built the "ruin" after the refined residence. We carefully worked with masons Ed and Greg Muller to create the right color, textured stone walls and used reclaimed antique wood for the doors. The spitting lion head's fountain was another lighthearted touch. For this design, we put aside computers and rendered our design in watercolor (opposite right).



Little of architectural history is pure, anyway. Most architects and builders are reacting to their times—what do they need and what materials are available. Architectural movements are named a hundred years after they end by people who don't design. These names and theories are sanitized and given higher order by theorists, not builders.

The historian Richard White in the book *The West* by Geoffrey C. Ward discusses how history is often told from the viewpoint of the victors as if their success was inevitable. He reminds us that



many possibilities existed at the time. He points out that while the horseshoe-crab survives from the Paleozoic Era, we cannot understand that era just from the survivor. We need to understand the fossils of those organisms that did not succeed.

Most architecture professors and historians will talk about architectural history as if it were simply the product of great architects with great ideas.

I suggest its genesis is elsewhere. It started with a culture that had a belief and a power broker who had a need; it

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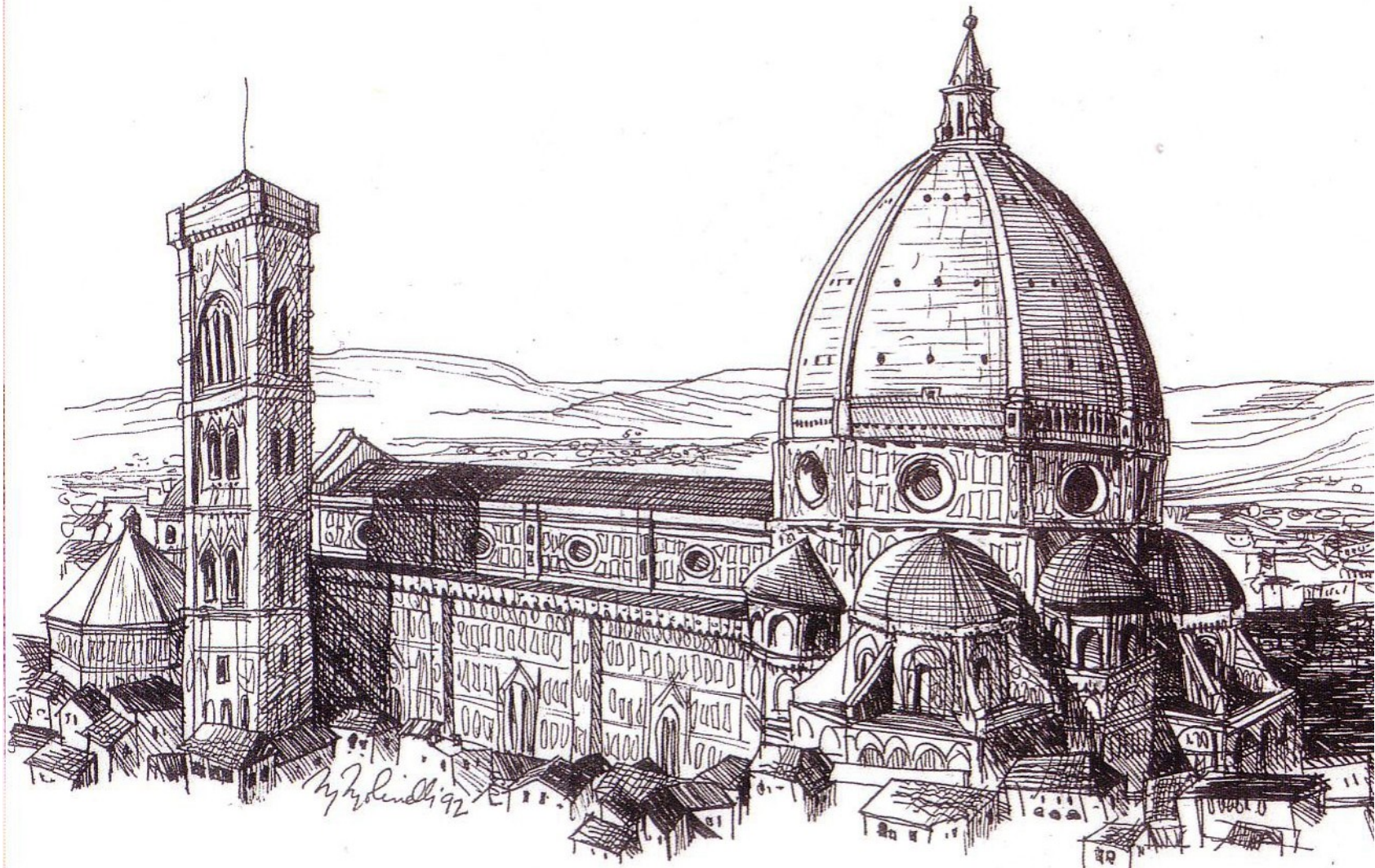
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was influenced by the available materials and skills of the workers; It probably was framed by architectural precedents and tempered by the prevailing taste. Innovation grew slowly until it was manifest in a seminal work we remember.

And one generation's cheap aluminum siding becomes the next generation's high art.

The Greeks worked in solid stone columns with carved marble capitals. The Romans copied it more cheaply by using special bricks for a column and faced it in marble. In the Renaissance, they often worked the classical details in plaster, and in the 19th century, those same details were executed in terracotta. Later those who could not afford terracotta used pressed metal. Today we pick fiberglass capitals, columns, entablatures and dentils from the Internet.





Brunelleschi's Dome which tops the Santa Maria Del Fiore in Florence (opposite), was a commission he was originally forced to share with Lorenzo Ghilberti who had designed the doors of the Baptistry in front of the cathedral.

Each era finds less expensive ways to achieve the look of the previous generation. At the time the cheaper means, like the style of architecture, is derided. Forty years later it is reviled. After eighty years it is venerated. Terracotta on building facades is today considered high art. What is the future for fiberglass?

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Places in history are tenuous at best. No one can make the moment. The Duomo in Florence was an important commission in architecture, both to the profession and inspiring a style that survives today. Now it seemed inevitable, but back then it did not.

According to the *Brunelleschi's Dome* by Ross King, Filippo Brunelleschi not only had to fight to get the project, but to keep it as well. The Opera del Duomo made him share the commission. Sub-committee's worked against him. His ideas were derided as impossible. War interrupted his project. Yet in spite of the opposition, he triumphed.

King later describes how the lantern on top of the dome helped Brunelleschi's friend Paolo Toscanelli make accurate celestial observations. He developed improvements to the Alfonsine Tables, charts used for ocean navigation. His interest led him to assert to his friend Fernao Martines in the royal court of Portugal that the shortest route to India was to sail west on the Atlantic Ocean. This letter was seen by Christopher Columbus. How flimsy history is!

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Architects do not work alone nor in a vacuum. They are products of their times. They create ideas but must find ways to enact them. They must convince those who hold the power that their ideas are valid and necessary. It is an exhausting process which most find more difficult than the creative act itself.

Perhaps architects build for a place in history. Except, places in recent history are too often occupied by new ideas instead of good ones. People confuse novelty with creativity. The result can be showy, impractical, pointless designs as architects pursue their unique idiom.

Ultimately architects' ideas need to confront the laws of physics, and the politics of man. When they do confront and succeed the result can be glorious. Or it could be forgotten, and a generation later, demolished.

