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建筑与文化

Architecture

A Very Short Introduction

Andrew Ballantyne 著
王贵祥 译

外语教学与研究出版社
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Myth

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Psychiatry

Renaissance Art

The Roman Empire

Shakespeare

Twentieth-Century Britain

The Vikings

World Music

World Trade Organization

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Contents

List of illustrations VII

Introduction 1

1 Buildings have meaning 17

2 Growth of the Western tradition 54

3 How buildings become great 84

Timeline 117

Glossary 120

Further reading 124

Index 127

目录

图目 x

绪论 135

第一章 有意义的房屋 152

第二章 西方传统的兴起 192

第三章 建筑如何变得伟大 225

年表 260

List of illustrations

1 AT&T Building, New York (1978–80); architect: Philip Johnson (born 1906) 12
© T. Brubaker/Edifice

2 Traditional cottage, uncertain date, but pre-20th century; no architect 26
Hulton Archive

3 Royal Pavilion, Brighton, England (1815–21); architect: John Nash (1752–1835) 28
© A. F. Kersting

4 Great Pyramid of Khufu, Giza, near Cairo, Egypt (2723–2563 BC); architect: unknown 30
© Richard T. Nowitz/Corbis

5 Palace of Westminster, London, England (1836–68); architect: Sir Charles Barry (1795–1860) with A. W. N. Pugin (1812–52) 35
© Jeremy Horner/Corbis

6 Chandigarh, Punjab, India (1950–65); architect: Le Corbusier (1887–1965) 36
© Chris Hellier/Corbis

7 The Parthenon, Athens, Greece (447–436 BC); architects: Ictinus and Callicrates working with the sculptor Phidias 40
© Michael Holford

8 Cathedral of St Etienne, Bourges, France (begun 1190) 42
© Eye Ubiquitous/Corbis

9 Schröder house, Utrecht, Netherlands (1924); architect: Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964) 46
Centraal Museum, Utrecht

10 Falling Water, Bear Run, Pennsylvania (1936–9); architect: Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) 52
© Chicago Historical Society

11 Wieskirche, Steinhausen, Bavaria, Germany (1745–54); architect: Dominikus Zimmerman (1681–1766) 60
© A. F. Kersting

12 Monticello, near Charlottesville, Virginia (1796–1808); architect: Thomas Jefferson (1743–1836) 63
© R. Lautman/Monticello

13 Maison Carrée, Nîmes, France (AD 1–10); architect: unknown 66
© A. F. Kersting

14 The Pantheon, Rome, Italy (AD 118–25); architect: anonymous, but worked under the direction of the Emperor Hadrian 68
Archivi Alinari, Florence

15 Villa Capra, Vicenza, Italy (1569); architect: Andrea Palladio (1508–80) 71
Archivi Alinari, Florence

16 Chiswick Villa, London, England (1725); architect: Lord Burlington (1694–1753) 75
© A. F. Kersting

17 Model of Temple of Juno Sospita, Lanuvium – Etruscan temple, according to Vitruvius (5th century BC) 81
© David Lees/Corbis

18 Seagram Building, Manhattan, New York City (1954–8); architects: Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) and Philip Johnson (born 1906) 86
© Bettmann/Corbis

19 Opera House, Sydney, Australia (1957–73); architect: Jorn Utson (born 1918) 88
© Eye Ubiquitous/Corbis

20 *Chicago Tribune* Tower, Chicago, Illinois (1923–5); architects: John Mead Howells (1868–1959) and Raymond Hood (1881–1934) 92
Underwood & Underwood/Corbis

21 Métro entrance surrounds, Paris, France (1899–1905); architect: Hector Guimard (1867–1942) 96
© Philippa Lewis/Edifice

22 Expiatory Church of the Sagrada Familia, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain (begun 1882); architect: Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) 99
© A. F. Kersting

23 Mausoleum of the Taj Mahal, Agra, India (1630–53); architect: Ustad 'Isa (dates unknown) 102
© A. F. Kersting

24 Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain (1997); architect: Frank Gehry (born 1929) 105
Erika Barahona Ede/© FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao

25 Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (1977); architects: Renzo Piano (born 1937) and Richard Rogers (born 1933) 109
© Eye Ubiquitous/Corbis

图目

图 1. 美国电报与电话公司大楼，纽约；建筑师：菲利普·约翰逊 148

图 2. 传统农舍，年代不确定，但应早于 20 世纪；没有经过建筑师设计 163

图 3. 皇家亭阁，布赖顿，英格兰；建筑师：约翰·纳什 164

图 4. 胡夫大金字塔，吉萨，开罗附近，埃及；建筑师：未知 165

图 5. 威斯敏斯特宫，伦敦，英国；建筑师：查尔斯·巴里爵士和 A.W. N. 普金 171

图 6. 昌迪加尔，旁遮普邦，印度；建筑师：勒·柯布西耶 173

图 7. 帕提农神庙，雅典，希腊；建筑师：伊克蒂诺和卡利克拉特与雕刻家菲迪亚斯共同合作完成 176

图 8. 圣艾蒂安大教堂，博格斯，法国 179

图 9. 施罗德住宅，乌得勒支，荷兰；建筑师：盖里·里特维尔德 184

图 10. 流水别墅，熊跑谷，宾夕法尼亚；建筑师：弗兰克·劳埃德·赖特 190

图 11. 威斯朝圣教堂，斯特因豪森，巴伐利亚，德国；建筑师：多米尼克斯·齐莫尔曼 199

图 12. 蒙蒂塞罗，夏洛茨维尔附近，弗吉尼亚；建筑师：托马斯·杰斐逊 203

图 13. 方形大厦，尼姆，法国；

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbo

建筑师：未知 205

图 14. 万神庙，罗马，意大利；建筑师：匿名，但在哈德良皇帝的指导下进行的设计 207

图 15. 圆厅别墅（卡普拉别墅），维琴察，意大利；建筑师：安德烈亚·帕拉第奥 211

图 16. 奇斯威克别墅，伦敦，英国；建筑师：伯灵顿伯爵 214

图 17. 朱诺·索斯皮塔神庙模型，拉努维马姆，伊特鲁里亚神庙，据威特鲁维 222

图 18. 西格拉姆大厦，曼哈顿，纽约；建筑师：密斯·凡·德·罗和菲利普·约翰逊 227

图 19. 歌剧院，悉尼，澳大利亚；建筑师：约翰·伍重 230

图 20. 芝加哥论坛报大厦，芝加哥，伊利诺伊；建筑师：约翰·迈德·豪威尔斯和雷蒙德·胡德 233

图 21. 地铁出入口护拦及雨篷，巴黎，法国；建筑师：赫克托·吉马德 238

图 22. 圣家族赎罪教堂，巴塞罗那，加泰罗尼亚，西班牙；建筑师：安东尼·高迪 241

图 23. 泰姬·玛哈尔陵，阿格拉，印度；建筑师：乌斯塔德·伊萨 244

图 24. 古根海姆博物馆，毕尔巴鄂，西班牙；建筑师：弗兰克·盖里 247

图 25. 蓬皮杜艺术文化中心，巴黎，法国；建筑师：伦佐·皮亚诺和理查德·罗杰斯 251

Introduction

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said, 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand
Half-sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.'
(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*, 1818)

Buildings can be the most expensive things that civilizations produce. They can absorb any amount of effort and money if they are to compete with the great buildings of rivals, and of the past. It might seem misguided to try to outdo others when the costs are so high, but no one remembers the civilizations that took such a decision, at least not in architectural history. By contrast civilizations such as ancient Egypt and Rome, which built extravagantly, seem unavoidable. The imperishable buildings

seem to go hand in hand with an imperishable reputation, which has always been the appeal of monuments for the powerful. When enough time has passed, all human achievements can seem fragile, and Shelley's famous poem *Ozymandias* shows both the attraction of the monumental and also how delusory its promise of everlasting glory can be. One of the things that matters about architecture is how it gives us clues to what really mattered to rulers of the past. Another thing is how it makes it possible for us, the living, to live in certain ways, and to demonstrate to each other and ourselves what it is that we really care about, as individuals and as a society. Different civilizations strike different balances between what seems to be owed to the living, and going beyond immediate needs in order to make things that build a reputation in posterity.

What this very short introduction tries to do is to explain how architecture goes about doing what it does. Buildings keep us warm and dry, and are closely involved in the practicalities of living, but 'architecture' always has a cultural dimension to it, if we choose to pay attention to it. Chapter 1 is about how buildings are involved with our sense of who we are. Chapter 2 looks at the way in which buildings are made to look like one another, so that they carry the right sort of messages to those 'in the know' in a particular culture. Chapter 3 considers what it is that makes some works of architecture come to be more culturally important than others.

One of the things that makes buildings particularly interesting to archaeologists is that they are caught up in so many aspects of life. The way they are organized tells us something about the way people interact in them, if we can work out which groups of people are brought together, and which kept apart. The materials from which buildings are made, and the way the materials are handled, can also tell us a great deal. If the stone came from a long way away, then we know that either there was an efficient transport system or that the stones were very special and worth a great deal of effort. If a building has a steel frame, then we know that it belongs to the modern age because the ancient world didn't know about them.

Buildings are an important part of the evidence available to us in knowing about what went on in the distant past, and they also tell us a good deal about what we really care about now. If we, as a society, allow motorways to be built across the countryside, then it can only happen because our care for the countryside is less than our desire to travel conveniently. As individuals we might have made a different decision, but as a society, given the flows and concentrations of money that circulate, and given the political processes that mediate the decisions, the buildings that surround us are produced. As individuals, most of us can do very little to shape the built environment in general. In some circumstances, though, concentrations of wealth and power have made it possible for individuals to command great changes. It was said of the Roman emperor Augustus that when he came to Rome it was built in brick, but when he left it was marble. And Ozymandias (Rameses II) evidently commissioned grand and extensive works. Buildings can be beautiful and inspiring, but if they are built (rather than just imagined) then they always have an economic and political aspect, as well as an aesthetic aspect. There are other aspects too, such as the technical side of things. Will it stand up? Will it keep the rain out? Can it be kept warm? Will it overheat? Can I use it as a place where I can live the life I want? Do I want to be the sort of person who lives in a place like this?

Given that a building has all these aspects, it is possible to write about architecture in ways that bring one or another of them to the fore. A history of building technology would be one possibility. This would be a story of progress, as more technically sophisticated ways of building superseded the more primitive ones. There would be significant advances, like the introduction of cement, and the arch, and a demonstration of the new types of building that these innovations made possible. What we lose sight of in this particular narrative is the fact that, at a given time, it is likely that few buildings will be technically advanced. Most buildings are just ordinary, and do not fall down or stop being useful the moment a technical advance has been made. Just as many people in Europe

live in houses that were built a hundred years or more ago, so in ancient Rome the vaulted structures for which we now particularly remember the Romans were not the buildings that made up the fabric of most of the city, and in fact nearly all the famous Roman structures date from quite late in the history of the Roman Empire, so they were unknown to most Romans. Most significantly, they were unknown to the only Roman writer on architecture whose writings are known to us: Vitruvius. He lived too early.

It is possible to exclude technical matters, or relegate them to the background. Then the history of architecture can become a story about different styles of building. One set of shapes gradually transformed into another over the course of time. This type of history makes it sound as if there is in architectural forms a will to evolve and develop. Traditions grow up, and the architects keep trying out new possibilities, some of which are seen as improvements and are copied by others, before being improved upon in their turn. This approach can lead to a preoccupation with stylistic analysis that can lose sight of the fact that there is a practical rationale to building. It can also lead to the setting aside of the social and economic issues, which can be interesting, and which are sometimes certainly the most important aspects of a building. There is also the complicating fact that things look different from close at hand and from a distance. What looks to us like a gradual change across the course of centuries might well have been a much less even-tempered process at the time. It is always unusual for people to change their ways of doing things, and often what happens when a new idea takes over is that a generation of people grows old and inactive, while younger people inculcated with the new idea take up the tools. Whether the change looks gradual or abrupt may depend on how far we are from the event. Tragedy is farce in close-up.

There is a great deal of architecture around, from the recent and distant past around the world. It would be impossible to collect it all together and present it to a reader, especially in a very short

introduction. It is necessary to be selective, and the particular buildings that one selects will vary according to the story that has to be told. The aim of this book is to open up ways of thinking about architecture that show how rich the topic is, which might make it confusing at times. The following chapters discuss different themes, and I have introduced buildings in order to help make particular points in the argument. Therefore the illustrated buildings are not ordered chronologically. In order to help give an idea of the order in which things happened, there is a timeline at the back of the book. It will be noticed that there are more examples of recent architecture than from the distant past. This is for two reasons. One is that there simply are more buildings now standing that are of recent date. The other is that we tend to be more interested in things that are closer to us. If I look at a pyramid as a building that stands for a civilization that lasted for, say, 3,000 years, then I can feel that in the grand sweep of things the coverage is adequate. But if I were to take the same approach to the architecture of the last 3,000 years, then I would feel that the coverage had been ludicrously inadequate. It would sound facetious and satirical to summarize European architecture in a single monument. The medieval cathedrals would be the large monuments from the middle of the period in question, but I would worry about presenting them as the only things that really mattered.

Clearly the point of view of the writer is implicated in the selections that are to be made, and my selections are shaped by my immersion in and formation by Western culture. Other points of view are possible, have validity, and would generate different choices. This is not to say, though, that the ideas presented here have no more than a personal significance. They connect with a tradition that has gone through many transformations and developments, and the ones that are closest to us seem perhaps to be the most significant. Perhaps computers, televisions, and telephones have given us not only new ways of living, but also new ways of being human in a global system of networks. From another perspective, however, these

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