

# THE SECRET LIVES OF BUILDINGS

FROM THE PARTHENON TO THE VEGAS STRIP IN THIRTEEN STORIES

**Edward Hollis** 



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### THE SECRET LIVES OF BUILDINGS

EDWARD HOLLIS is an architect and designer who teaches at the Edinburgh College of Art. Trained at Cambridge and Edinburgh universities, he worked for five years in the United Kingdom as a practising architect, specializing in alterations to historic buildings. This is his first book.

TO MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHER, without whom this book would never have been undertaken;

> AND TO PAUL, without whom it would never have been completed.

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# INTRODUCTION



THE ARCHITECT'S DREAM.
Thomas Cole, 1838.

### The Architect's Dream

Once upon a time an architect had a dream.

The curtain of his bourgeois parlour was rent, and he found himself reclining on top of a colossal column overlooking a great port. On a nearby hill, the spire of a Gothic cathedral rose above pointed cypresses in a dark wood; on the other side of the river, a Corinthian rotunda and the brick arches of a Roman aqueduct were bathed in golden light. The aqueduct had been built on top of a Grecian colonnade, in front of which a procession led from the waterside to an elaborate Ionic shrine. Further away the form of a Doric temple crouched beneath an Egyptian palace, and behind them all, veiled in haze and a wisp of cloud, was the Great Pyramid.

It was a moment of absolute stillness. A perspective in time had become a perspective in space, as the past receded in an orderly fashion, style by style, from the parlour curtain of the present all the way back to the horizon of antiquity. The Dark Ages partially obscured classical splendour; Roman magnificence was built on the foundation of Grecian reason; the glory that was Greece lay in the shadow of the ur-architecture of Egypt. The array of buildings formed an architectural canon, each example dispensing inspiration, advice, and warning to the architect from the golden treasury of bistory.

All the great buildings of the past had been resurrected in a monumental day of rapture. Everything had been made new, and neither weather nor war nor wandering taste had scarred the scene. Everything was fixed just as it had been intended to be: each building was a masterpiece, a work of art, a piece of frozen music, unspoiled by compromise, error, or disappointment. There was nothing that could be added or taken away except for the worse. Each building was beautiful, its form and function held in perfect balance.

The scene was what architecture was, and is, and should be. But just before he awoke, the architect realized that he was dreaming, and he recalled the words of Prospero renouncing his conjured dominion at the end of The Tempest:

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind: We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

World to the New. Thomas Cole was born in Lancashire in 1801, but he spent his adult life among the crags and forests of the Hudson Valley north of New York City, where he painted pictures of an arcadia not yet buried under towers and palaces and temples. Cole could not prevent himself from thinking about the Old World he had left behind, and he knew that one day the New World would come to resemble it. His cycle of paintings entitled *The Course of Empire* depicted the Hudson Valley at five different stages: in *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, at *The Consummation of Empire*, at *The Destruction of Empire*, and in *Desolation*. In these five images, a virgin forest at dawn becomes a great city at noon. By dusk it is a broken heap of stones, whited under a watery moon.

In 1840 the architect Ithiel Town commissioned Cole to paint *The Architect's Dream* and paid him in pattern books. Town didn't much like the painting, but it came to be regarded as Cole's masterpiece. Cole's funeral eulogy extolled it among the 'principal works ... of his genius', as 'an

assemblage of structures, Egyptian, Gothic, Grecian, Moorish, such as might present itself to the imagination of one who had fallen asleep after reading a work on the different styles of architecture'.

Cole's vision still haunts architects. Pick up any classic work on architecture, glance at the pictures, and you will find yourself lost in a similar panorama of 'the different styles'. Crisp line drawings describe the masterworks of antiquity as new and fresh as the day they were born; and blue skies, clean streets, and a complete absence of people lend architectural photographs the timeless quality of *The Architect's Dream*. It's not just the illustrations: the written history of architecture is also a litany of masterpieces, unchanging and unchanged, from the Great Pyramid of Giza to its glass descendants in Paris or Vegas. The great buildings of the past are described as if the last piece of scaffolding has just been taken away, the paint is still fresh on the walls, and the ribbon has not yet been cut — as if, indeed, history had never happened.

It is a timeless vision because timeless is just what we expect great architecture to be. Nearly a century ago, the Viennese architect Adolf Loos observed that architecture originates not, as one might expect, in the dwelling, but in the monument. The houses of our ancestors, which were contingent responses to their ever-shifting needs, have perished. Their tombs and temples, which were intended to endure for the eternity of death and the gods, remain, and it is they that form the canon of architectural history.

The very discourse of architecture is a discourse on perfection, a word which derives from the Latin for 'finished'. The Roman theorist Vitruvius claimed that architecture was perfect when it held commodity, firmness, and delight in delicate balance. A millennium and a half later, his Renaissance interpreter Leone Battista Alberti wrote that perfect beauty is that to which nothing may be added, and from which nothing may be taken away. The Modernist architect Le Corbusier described the task of his profes-