



e-ISSN: 2630-6417

International Journal of Social,  
Humanities and Administrative  
Sciences (JOSHAS JOURNAL)

Vol: 8 Issue: 57  
Year: 2022 October  
Pp: 1280-1284

Arrival  
04 July 2022  
Published  
25 October 2022

Article ID  
64868  
Article Serial Number  
02

DOI NUMBER  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/JOSHAS.64868>

How to Cite This Article  
Kutluay, P. (2022). "A View of  
Roman Architecture: Achieving  
Monumentality Through Politics,  
Urbanism, and Visual Imagery",  
Journal of Social, Humanities and  
Administrative Sciences,  
8(57):1280-1284



International Journal of Social,  
Humanities and Administrative Sciences  
is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0  
International License.  
This journal is an open access, peer-  
reviewed international journal.

# A View of Roman Architecture: Achieving Monumentality Through Politics, Urbanism, and Visual Imagery

Pınar Kutluay

Res. Assist., Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Architecture, Kütahya, Turkey

## ABSTRACT

Roman architecture is usually considered a whole with Greek architecture. Referring to its formal qualities, it has been regarded as perfect throughout architectural history. However, this perfection not only derives from formal qualities but also monumentality that revolved around the issues of politics, urbanism, and visual imagery. Roman buildings conveyed political messages that contributed to their monumental characters and their arrangements defined monumentality on the urban scale. Furthermore, visual imagery offered citizens a different architectural and urban experience that led to perceiving monumentality in their minds. This paper tries to examine Roman architecture in terms of these three concepts of politics, urbanism, and visual imagery based on how they contributed to achieving monumentality.

**Keywords:** Monumentality, Politics, Urbanism, Visual Imagery

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Considering architectural history, it is possible to claim that Roman architecture is usually taken for granted. It is widely classified as a part of ancient architecture together with Greek architecture. With the impact of the Renaissance, it is usually regarded as almost perfect, especially in terms of formal qualities. However, rather than formal qualities, Roman architecture goes beyond this perfection that is in mind with its focus on monumentality fed by politics, urbanism, and visual imagery. In Roman architecture, monumentality was mostly achieved with buildings that reflected the political power of the empire including identity issues together with the process of Romanization and whose organizations made urbanism a leading aspect. Furthermore, visual imagery reinforced by urban design played an important role in how architecture was perceived as monumental in the minds of citizens. This paper tries to examine Roman architecture in terms of these three concepts of politics, urbanism, and visual imagery based on how they contributed to achieving monumentality.

Monumentality is one of the first terms that come to mind about Roman architecture, which is mostly considered to be monumental and perfect. For instance, although the architects of most Roman buildings are unknown, Mark Wilson Jones calls them unsung heroes. Furthermore, monuments themselves are directly important. As he writes, due to the limited number of available literary sources, they constitute the primary sources to comprehend Roman architectural design. However, in terms of the monuments, there has been a problem with interpretation as they were mostly analyzed based on their formal qualities in terms of being monumental. Although there was not enough evidence to support it, they were mostly depicted as perfect in paper restorations of ancient buildings. For instance, Renaissance survey drawings tended to correct existing mistakes in terms of alignments and symmetry. In fact, the Renaissance movement was mostly about arithmetical proportion and was based on the idea that beauty originated from that. Later, in the eighteenth century, different approaches regarding beauty and mathematics came to the scene. The Romantic movement was more interested in what was irrational, imaginative, and visionary. Then in the nineteenth century, geometrical theories became popular, and their impact lasted into the twentieth century. Still,

there were not consistent and widely accepted theories that explained how Romans built. It seems that Roman architecture did not have a normative system as Pierre Gros claims. Furthermore, for William MacDonald, the orders were set freely, in a different way than what Vitruvius and Renaissance interpreters wrote about. Architects and workers still had a framework. However, they did not very precisely follow it. Romans' approach to design was not very strict; it was about applying principles instead of certain rules and methods (Jones, 2003). Therefore, it is possible to claim that monumentality in Roman architecture carries a different meaning which goes beyond the formal qualities.

## **2. POLITICS IN ROMAN ARCHITECTURE AND ITS RELATION TO MONUMENTALITY**

Conveying political messages was a major part of the monumentality of Roman architecture. Edmund Thomas claims that buildings also had political meanings for Romans (Thomas, 2007). Constructing a building itself was a political and public activity as it was very visible and required many workers (Thomas, 2007). Monuments of building contractors that were made during the building boom in Flavian and Trajanic Rome demonstrate that physical features of construction such as using huge cranes and scaffolding structures also contributed to the monumentality (Thomas, 2007). Also, architecture was used as a means for conveying political messages and public spaces and the Fora of Augustus and Trajan can be regarded as some significant examples of this approach. Wolfgang Sonne writes that buildings in Roman architecture were never completely isolated from politics in view of some recent architectural theorists. Furthermore, they have been interpreted by historians in a political way as they are cultural monuments (Thomas, 2007). In addition to the buildings themselves, the freestanding column was also a form of monument that represented the achievement of a victory. In the High Empire, monumentalization was important and columns were also used as place markers or memorials to define where divinity or the deceased was located. The columns of Caesar and Galba and the colossal columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius are some examples of this situation (Yoncaci Arslan, 2016).

In addition to columns, the usage of inscriptions in architecture also contributed to the monumentality through politics. For instance, as Thomas cites, from the early times of the empire, a sense of monumentality appeared from the use of inscriptions in the forum paving (Thomas, 2007). Among such inscriptions, the *Res Gestae* of August stands out. It was basically an account of contemporary history written by Augustus and addressed Roman people. Spreading to Galatia, which was a distant province of the Roman Empire in Anatolia, it went beyond being a literary representation of power and became a textual monument that reflected the ideology of the empire (Güven, 1998). In such ways that Roman architecture and art employed, Roman identity was also promoted.

Regarding politics in Roman architecture, the term identity also played an important role. Referring to the identities of people who lived in the newly conquered regions, the process of "Romanization" appeared. It was formed by integrating Roman social structures to local communities, especially to the upper-classes (Elsner, 1998). To involve such privileged families in the culture and to build public buildings was a part of Romanization which was applicable both in rural parts of Italy and Asia Minor (Yegül, 2000). However, especially in Greek regions, there was denial and acceptance together with resistance and affirmation during the process of integrating Roman identity to the existing local traditions (Elsner, 1998). MacDonald argues that the unique character of Roman architecture derived from the need to construct collective identity in cities and towns.

## **3. URBANISM IN ROMAN ARCHITECTURE AND ITS RELATION TO MONUMENTALITY**

Urbanism was also a prominent aspect of Roman architecture regarding monumentality. For MacDonald, Roman imperial architecture can be regarded as a process of forming cities and towns by showing their culmination and development (MacDonald, 1986). Visual layout of public architecture also suggests some political impact considering the sizes devoted to public and private buildings in terms of distribution. In this way, architecture reflected how power was divided in a society. Urban aspects are also important in terms of representation of identity and unity together with politics. For Thomas, the outer boundary of the city was the urban element that demonstrated the identity and unity in the clearest way, not the buildings. City walls were the most vital element in the representations of urban form in Roman architecture. Thomas writes that in a recently discovered fresco from Oppian Hill, the buildings behind the wall were less significant than the city wall together with its gates and towers. Furthermore, for him, the circuit wall was the outermost representation of the form of a city that conveyed the political identity of it to the visitors. Sometimes this political function even surpassed the actual function of a typical city wall. For instance, the gate at Bizya did not have any military value. However, it served social and political functions to attract the attention of foreign visitors, remind the citizens of the evident urbanity and prevent bandits and vagabonds from entering the city. In fact, the image of city gates and walls became a symbol of civic identity, and it was even used as an allegorical metonym for the city itself.

Moving into city from the city walls, the politicians had to remind their audiences that they should see their cities as architectonic unities, and this depended on the human factor. Most ancient cities seemed different without the effect of orderly grids to its visitors at that time. Narrow lanes, passages, and byways of ancient cities that we do not see in sites now shaped public movement and defined neighborhoods. Furthermore, the broad streets and the huge columnar monuments contributed to directing the movement of citizens while forming a vision of civic unity. However, using broad avenues and gateways to order and unify cities caused fragmentation as well. Arches also divided cities into smaller units in a topographical way. Therefore, some modern architectural theorists claim that the urban form in Roman architecture was not very orderly. Indeed, the uniqueness of a city derived from its variety. Today a successful image of a city comes from the combination of separate focal points rather than a continuous organic system. In terms of urbanism, monumentality was an important concern. Since the later Hellenistic period, viewing of urban space shifted from whole areas to individual monuments. In this case, urban monumentality referred to looking at single buildings. As the different individual complexes were framed in a way like pictures, the whole town could transform into a series of separate images of sight. These monumental architectural frames reinforced the viewing of important statuary as well. In the total monumental frame of a city (Figure 1), buildings that were connected to each other with axes and steps became landmarks that shaped the identity of the place (Thomas, 2007). They also stand out as significant and interdependent elements of urban configurations rather than just being functional or a part of stylistic groupings. They can be seen as proof of a process whose results in an urban environment involved the echo of Roman classicism.

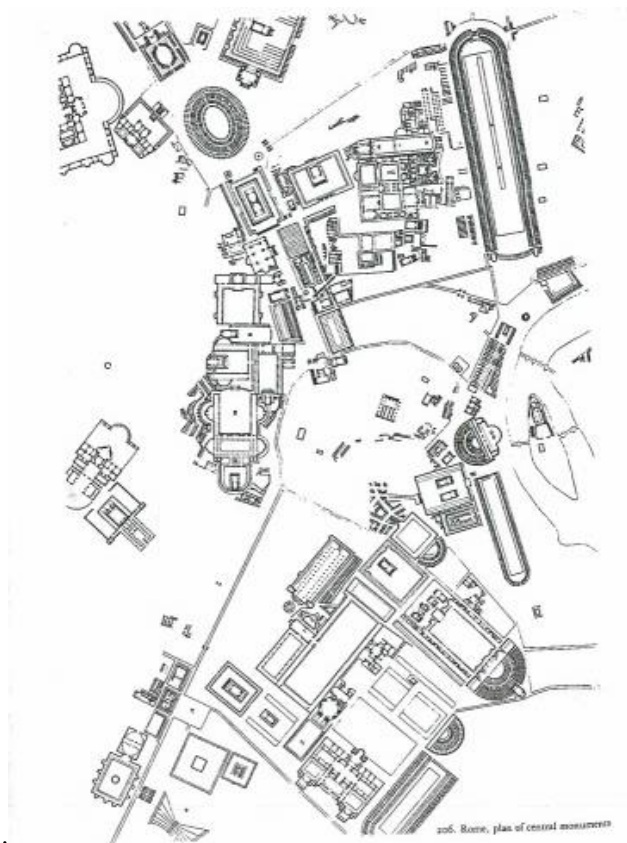


Figure 1. Plan of Central Monuments in Rome  
Source: MacDonald, 1986

Rather than style, urban needs indicated the forms and imagery in Roman architecture. The contextual relationships among the buildings are the evidence of this situation. No building was isolated, all the buildings were connected to each other formally and stylistically to form the urban environment. In addition to function, communal visual relations were also important. For instance, in the city of Ostia, exteriors of theatre and amphitheater were related to tiered aqueduct while theatre stage-buildings to thoroughfare nymphaea, and temple fronts to many secular buildings. These resemblances probably referred to the idea of continuity, in terms of classical approaches.

In addition to the notion of continuity, movement was another important notion to consider regarding urbanism in Roman architecture. The towns had purposes to fulfill and places for people and people had to move. Along their movements, narratives whose meanings came from a form of kinetogenesis based on motion became alive. Experiencing architecture by walking enhances the narrative experience of the mobile observer. Telling a longer and more detailed story, Roman cities offered a richer experience than its predecessors. The subject of that narrative was

the message about the being a member of the community. Furthermore, conveying their messages, buildings of Romans emerged in distant places to promote the political power of the empire (MacDonald, 1986). These situations both contributed to the monumental character of Roman architecture.

#### 4. VISUAL IMAGERY IN ROMAN ARCHITECTURE AND ITS RELATION TO MONUMENTALITY

Narratives were significant in Roman architecture, and they contributed to monumentality as a part of visual imagery. Roman urban observers had the opportunity of reading city environments in depth, and they were capable of that. Walking or using animals while passing through the cities, they could investigate the places in a close way. Furthermore, in comparison to modern urban observers, Romans of the late first century B.C. were much more literate in visual ways. Visual imagery served as a literal text for everyone in such a society where few could read. Roman readers also had good mnemonic skills.

The education of every upper-class Roman citizen involved rhetoric, which is the art of persuasive speaking (Favro, 1993). It was about to select a fixed setting that could be a house, public building or an artwork like painting and pick a series of places in that setting that were organized according to a certain order and places such as angles, arches, etc. Then mentally, each of these places were associated with signs or symbols to represent the topic of an imaginary speech. When the time came, the orator would move through the places in his mind and form a well-structured speech accordingly (Onians, 1999). As Romans thought that it was not preferable to use notes, memorization was very important for all orators. In Roman architecture, an individual building like a house can be considered a whole with spatial continuity that made structures powerful memory tools for rhetoricians. A real city is obviously more complex. In fact, the meaning was the real urban elements themselves. Romans from all classes were accustomed to reading a content in buildings that conveyed a message about their patrons (Favro, 1993).

Rhetorical education formed the framework to understand urban messages. Still, orators did not clearly explain their metaphors and analogies, expecting the listener would come up with an interpretation, referring to hermeneutics. However, the lower classes could not use rhetorical training that would help them understand ancient Rome's urban narrative. Instead, these uneducated observers developed visual mnemonic skills. While the educated observers used their rhetorical skills to understand the meaning, the uneducated ones relied on visual features more (Favro, 1993). In both ways, the monumentality of architecture was conveyed to the citizens of the city through visual imagery. Furthermore, the inscriptions like *Res Gestae* also contributed to the visual imagery by allowing a monumental image of architecture appear in citizens' minds while they were in the urban scene.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that Roman architecture reflects monumentality that surpasses formality and revolves around the concepts of politics, urbanism, and visual imagery. Buildings had political messages to convey and the identity issues with the process of Romanization enhanced the impact of politics in architecture leading to monumentality. Organizations of buildings were significant in terms of urbanism that contributed to achieving monumentality as well. Furthermore, visual imagery as a common conception in Roman architecture also added more meaning to the urban scene in the minds of citizens and made them experience monumentality. All three of these notions of politics, urbanism, and visual imagery contributed to achieving monumentality in different ways and formed the framework of the monumental character of Roman architecture.

#### REFERENCES

1. Elsner, Jas. (1998). *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.
2. Favro, Diane. (1993). "Reading the Augustan City." (Ed. Peter Halliday), *Narrative and Event in Ancient Art*, pp. 230-257, Cambridge University Press, London.
3. Güven, Suna. (1998). "Displaying the *Res Gestae* of Augustus: A Monument for Imperial Image for All," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 57 (1): 30-45.
4. Jones, Mark Wilson. (2003). *Principles of Roman Architecture*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
5. MacDonald, William. (1986). *The Architecture of the Roman Empire, Volume II: An Urban Appraisal*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
6. Onians, John. (1999). *Classical Art and the Culture of Greece and Rome*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London.
7. Thomas, Edmund. (2007). *Monumentality and the Roman Empire, Architecture in the Antonine Age*. Oxford University Press, London.

8. Yegül, Fikret Kutlu. (2000). “Memory, Metaphor and Meaning in the Cities of Asia Minor.” (Ed. Elizabeth Fentress), Romanization and the City, Creation, Transformations and Failures, Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series, no. 38, pp., 133-153. Portsmouth, Rhode Island.
9. Yoncaçı Arslan, Pelin. (2016). “Towards a New Honorific Column: The Column of Constantine in Early Byzantine Urban Landscape,” METU JFA, 33 (1): 121-145.