

Ancient Roman Influences on Modern American Architecture

Roman influences on modern architecture can be found in numerous places in the United States and around the world. Romans are also responsible for many of the simple engineering concepts that are relied on for the construction of buildings. The Roman invention of concrete and eventually the fired brick allow for the construction of strong buildings at significantly less cost than using other substances such as stone. Roman engineering is also responsible for the marvel that is the load-bearing arch structure. Roman architecture is distinguished by its use of concrete, fired bricks, arches, vaults and domes. The most widely used of these in modern architecture is concrete and fired brick.

Roman architecture was among the most technically advanced architecture of the ancient world. Roman architecture utilized more advanced materials, such as brick, concrete and marble to construct buildings and other structures utilizing more advanced forms, such as arches, vaults and domes. In addition to the technical sophistication of Roman designs, there were also stylistic choices that made Roman architecture distinct. Some of these stylistic elements are exterior staircases, columns and buildings raised on a podium.

Modern American architecture borrows many aspects of Roman buildings. Modern usage of Roman architecture in the United States is primarily seen in public buildings, such as courts, libraries, museums and seats of government. This presence in public spaces reflects the relationship between Roman government and the American system of government. Most of the

architecture of Washington, D.C. and the overall layout of the city are very much inspired by Roman styles and techniques. The use of columns is one of the first keys to seeing Roman architecture in Washington, D.C. They are prevalent on most buildings and monuments in the district, ranging from the White House to the Lincoln Memorial. This memorial also bears a resemblance to the Temple of Jupiter in its use of the simple rectangular design, columns, and raised podium. The raised podium is also common in many other buildings that emulate Roman architecture, such as the Supreme Court building and Capitol Building. In addition to the podium design, each of these buildings also features columns of white marble. The Supreme Court building features a triangular header above the columns, which is similar to the features of numerous Roman temples. The Capitol Building is designed utilizing an occult dome, which is also a creation of Roman architecture.

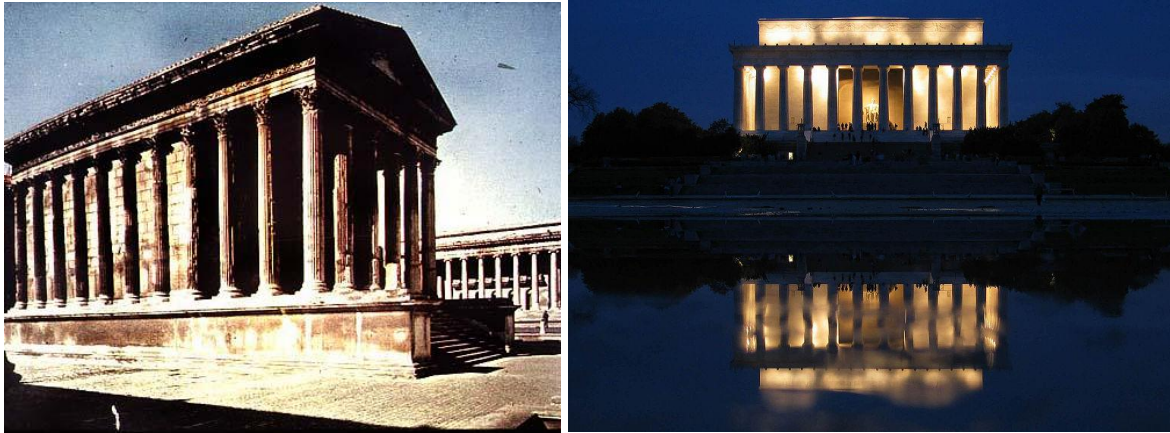
Roman influences were prevalent in all forms of modern architecture until steel became a practical and affordable option for construction. Even with the use of steel though, some design elements of Roman architecture persist in modern design, such as the amphitheater (theaters in the round) and stadium-style arenas that resemble the Roman coliseum. There are numerous bridges that owe their existence to the introduction of the arch to architecture by the Romans. The arch structure allows for much more load-bearing support than other shapes.

Roman homes have some features in common with modern American homes, but there are some important differences. In the typical Roman house there were a variety of specialized rooms, such as the atrium, fauces and vestibulum which modern houses do not typically have in the same scale. It is common for modern homes to have atriums or entry rooms that serve no other function, but they are not typically as large as their Roman counterpart, except in larger luxury houses. Modern atriums however, do not typically feature an opening to the sky as

ancient Roman atriums did. In contrast, modern homes almost always have windows of some type, whereas Roman houses were designed to focus inward, and therefore were designed without windows. The fauces and vestibulum function as an entry passage, similar to a modern foyer. When comparing Roman houses to modern American houses one of the most distinguishing characteristics is the use of rooms for specific purposes. While it is common to call a room a “dining room” or a “bedroom”, those rooms are often used for other purposes not associated with their title, whereas in Roman houses, each room was typically for a single purpose. In Roman houses the cubiculum was used as a sleeping chamber, often with ceilings that were lower over the bed space, completely opposite to modern design trends. One design that is in common between modern house design and Roman design is the use of a central space around which other rooms were built. In Roman architecture this was commonly the atrium and the peristylum, each being surrounded by smaller rooms and providing light and fresh air for the house. In comparison, modern homes are typically built with all rooms surrounding a den or other open “living” space. Roman houses were built with two such spaces, but modern architecture typically includes only one central room.

Roman architecture and engineering provided much to modern building practices. Without Roman influences modern American architecture would have a very different appearance and with the absence of brick, construction techniques would have evolved much more slowly.

Illustrations:



Temple of Jupiter compared to the Lincoln Memorial

Roman House Layout



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