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Map 1  Map of the Roman Empire.
Map 1 (Continued).
Map 2 Provinces of the Roman Empire.
Map 4  Schematic Plan of Rome showing the location of major monuments.

Introduction

The architecture of Rome’s great Empire has long captured our imagination. The Romans themselves were enamored with their built environment. Ancient authors were just as likely to celebrate the grandeur and beauty of ancient buildings as they were to decry their excess, Nero’s Domus Aurea being a notable example of the latter. Within Roman literature the emphasis on space – from Ovid’s fascination with the lascivious activity sheltered within Augustan porticoes to Statius’s awe at the soaring heights of the imperial palace – more broadly demonstrates a keen desire to explore its symbolic import. Since antiquity, the ruins of Rome’s storied past have appealed to a broad spectrum of society, at once inspiring emulation and, like the slave who accompanied the emperor in his triumph, reminding viewers of the transience of human accomplishment. Roman architecture has provided the formal templates for reimagining western architecture over the past 500 years, yielding architectural treatises ranging from Leon Battista Alberti’s *Ten Books of Architecture* to Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* and monumental realizations from Palladio’s Villa Capra (“La Rotonda”) to James Stirling’s Neue Staatsgalerie. Its iconic structures have fueled a thriving economy in entertainment and tourism that once drew the aristocratic gentry and now caters to a global consumer market. Yet, for all its glory, Roman architecture also stands as a sober testament to a fallen empire and as such has become the conceptual space for contemplating time, mortality, and hubris in a range of media, from the writings of Edward Gibbon and Marguerite Yourcenar to the films of Federico Fellini and the poetry of John Keats.
The ubiquity of Roman architecture and the scale and sheer human effort represented by its enduring physical traces account for its longstanding fascination. Growing from its prehistoric and republican roots, Roman building spread throughout the Italic peninsula and made its mark across a sprawling empire spanning modern-day Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The extant structures have preserved a full spectrum of spaces that accommodated every aspect of Roman life – public to private, secular to sacred, high to low. Whether highlights on a bus tour or overgrown ruins known only to the specialist, their forms are equally important in manifesting complex negotiations between the historically contingent categories of Romans and non-Romans, free and servile, Rome and her environs, and the past and present.

While Roman architecture was the self-conscious product of particular historical moments, critical to its development throughout history was interaction among diverse cultures of the Italic peninsula and the broader Mediterranean world. During the earliest phases of this process, Latin tribes were receptive to ideas learned from their non-Latin neighbors; they drew upon their own ingenuity and the natural resources around them, discovering the properties of materials and developing along the way principles of form and spatial organization that would ultimately become deeply rooted traditions for their descendents, those peoples who were to become “Romans.” New structural and decorative forms were soon introduced by colonists arriving in Italy from Greece, and eventually direct contact with the Greek cities of the eastern Mediterranean through trade and warfare exposed the growing city of Rome to new materials and design principles that were adapted and absorbed to the prescripts of more ancient Italic traditions. Over time, the physical structure of these buildings, the spaces they enclosed, and the views they framed, succeeded in accommodating and imparting a sense of what it was to be “Roman,” an identity always subject to experience, time, and place. Familial hierarchies, civic administration, ritual and sacrifice, leisure, entertainment, simple routines of movement throughout the day, and finally death itself were accommodated, regulated, and codified through the built environment.

From an early stage, the development of Roman architecture and the forms that it took were shaped by its association with the socio-political authority of individuals and communities. The Roman patron seemed to understand intuitively the power of the built environment to proclaim superiority over his competitors, and to enforce social hierarchies that favored the status quo. By the dawn of the imperial period, architecture in Rome declared the city’s far-reaching authority, through its display of imported marble and colored stones, looted sculpture and other valuables seized from conquered lands that adorned its surfaces and interiors, and enslaved labor that made building on a grand scale possible. At the same time, the design, construction, and decoration of
provincial architecture addressed the oft-conflicting demands of imperial, regional, and local identities. Just as local potentates curried favor with the Capital through construction projects designed to echo through design, materials, and eponymous dedication the signature buildings of Rome, they raised buildings that responded to the needs of their local context and identity.

Today Roman architecture is a rich field of study, its interests and debates enlivened and largely reframed by the intensive scholarly inquiry of the past 20 years. New archaeological discoveries, both in Rome and in the provinces, have significantly expanded the corpus of Roman architecture, and technological advances have provided new tools for the recovery of archaeological data and for the examination and analysis of ancient spaces, from isolated buildings to entire city plans. As a result, scholars have been able to reassess traditional historical accounts and broaden our understanding of historically neglected or elusive periods, lesser-known sites in provincial settings, and canonical building types. While formalism continues to play an important role in Roman architectural studies both in comprehensive treatments and more focused works (i.e., on single building types), the past 20 years reveal a desire to understand form as one factor in a complex nexus of Rome’s cultural production and reception. Rather than treat architecture as an image of static monumentality, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the dynamics of its form, from the numerous studies on the design and construction process made possible by new technologies to those examining ancient and modern reception of these spaces. In the process, the longstanding structural and monumental definition of Roman architecture has yielded to a more expansive understanding that highlights the interplay of space and ornament, especially in domestic architecture, the role of landscape within and beyond Rome’s built environments, the interaction among inscriptions, facades, and streets, and the importance of ephemeral materials and temporary structures.

The desire to understand Roman architecture as an integrated cultural practice, encompassing a range of factors from design to reception, has resulted in interdisciplinary approaches that examine the dynamic interplay among aesthetics, social structure, politics, and geography in the production and use of Roman architecture. In particular, scholars have highlighted the relation among design, artifacts, and social ritual in the Roman house, patronage and design, the gaze and social control, the permeability of public and private aesthetics, the social dimensions of the urban environment, and the role of architecture in negotiating provincial identity. Even Vitruvius, whose classification system has long underpinned the modern historiographic narrative, has been the subject of contextualized readings that draw attention to the political and philosophical significance of his text.
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Despite the wealth of new work, the most recent comprehensive treatments of Roman architecture for English speakers, ranging from handbooks to more encyclopedic studies, appeared primarily in a roughly 20-year period from 1960 through the early 1980s. These include the works of Frank Brown, Mortimer Wheeler, Axel Boëthius, John Bryan Ward-Perkins, Frank Sear, and William MacDonald. Although the chronological and geographic scope of these reviews vary, and the depth of treatment is necessarily limited, they share a formalist approach to Roman architecture and urban planning organized according to chronological and typological narratives. The most influential among them has been *Etruscan and Roman Architecture*, a collaboration between Boëthius and Ward-Perkins first published in 1970 and still in print (now in two volumes). The single most comprehensive treatment of the subject ever undertaken, this book examines the chronological development of Roman architecture in Rome and Italy from the Etruscans through Late Antiquity and offers the first serious overview of Roman provincial architecture in any language. Of course, if we were to include important books on the topic of Roman architecture in other languages, this list would be greatly expanded. Some of these, such as Jean-Pierre Adam’s *La construction romaine: Matériaux et techniques*, have been translated into English; others, such as the influential overviews written by Pierre Gros or, for the city of Rome specifically, Filippo Coarelli, remain in their original languages.

Rather than attempt an encyclopedic review of Roman architecture, this volume highlights new discoveries and approaches by updating the longstanding historiographic attention to periodization and typology and by addressing the dynamic processes of architectural creation and reception. The volume begins with a six-chapter overview of Roman architectural design from the Iron Age to the early fourth century. Divided according to the traditional periodization of the field, the chapters examine distinctive architectural design features within a specific historical context while identifying continuities among them. Chapters 7–10 consider the underlying processes of Roman building – planning, construction techniques, the supply of building materials, and organization of the labor force – in order to shed light on the social, economic, and logistical negotiations and choices that shaped the final works. The overview of design and process sets the stage for a more focused study of canonical building types and spaces (both urban and rural, public and private) that structured and reflected the social practices of the Roman world. Each of the chapters 11–20 draws attention to the origin and development of a given typology within changing geographical, political, and social contexts. The volume closes with five chapters that selectively address the reception of Roman architecture from antiquity to the present day, reflecting on ancient representations and contemporary archaeological practices as dynamic media continually reassessing the relationships between the past, present, and future.