

The Pantheon: An Ancient Masterpiece that Inspired Academic America

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ABSTRACT: The Roman Pantheon is one of the most notable and influential structures ever produced by Western Civilization. Built of a variety of materials, including a type of ancient concrete, the Romans employed a variety of new construction techniques and features that gave it a unique look and lasting qualities. Today it remains one of the best-preserved ancient structures, which has been replicated in various form over the course of the 20th Century, especially in academic architecture. Here we will look at *four* examples in particular that attempted, in some fashion, to mimic the grandiosity of the original monument while adding features unique to present structural utilization. Additionally, we will delve into *why* the Pantheon was replicated and imitated, as opposed to other famous, iconic structures.

KEYWORDS: Campus Architecture, Architecture, Pantheon, Neoclassical, Replica Architecture, Jefferson, Anchor Buildings, flattery, imitations

Today, the University of Virginia's main campus stands as one of the most inspiring designs that continues to influence campus design and architecture, both nationally and internationally. Designed personally by Thomas Jefferson in the early 1800's, the encompassing, landscape altering 'academical village' built from scratch was a relatively new idea. Jefferson's vision of a college was that of a community constantly interacting in class and beyond, totally divorced from the dangerous and distracting urban realities that most colleges faced back then. The design would be one of an enormous grassy mall, lined with neoclassical "pavilions" and anchored by a structure directly mimicking the Roman Pantheon, both in style and in scale, from within and without (Wilson 2009, 108-112).

The Grandeur of the Roman Pantheon

The Roman Pantheon is a structure that has literally stood the test of time. Few doubt during any era of history that it was and remains one of the best preserved structures of the Ancient Roman Empire, and a grand and precise one at that. Its scale is enough to render a normally sized adult humbled, as its gigantic portico of granite Corinthian columns commands one's attention on the way in. Its grand dome rises over 100 feet from the Earth's surface, and its interior is *meant* to awe (DuTemple 2003, 24).

Inside the Pantheon is a single spherical hall surrounded by a series of statuary and other niches. All attention is directed upwards over 180 feet to its huge concrete dome, coffered with mathematical precision. Atop the dome is no statue to any god or goddess; rather, is a large hole that serves as the Temple's main source of light: the oculus. Though open to the elements, the structure is designed to let in rain which then harmlessly drains toward the center of its vast marble floor (DuTemple 2003, 40-44).

Jefferson's *Rotunda*: Campus Anchor

This was the structure Jefferson sought to copy and adapt for his vision of the University of Virginia's campus. The admiration of the Pantheon in the United States was actually not new. In his original plans for the United States Capitol as designed in the 1790's, architect William

Thornton basically adopted the Roman example (with wings for each legislative house) to be set atop Jenkin’s Hill in the nation’s administrative center. To enhance the structure’s importance, a series of streets and boulevards radiated from it in every direction to remind everyone of the importance and centrality of the Federal Government in the Modern Republic. And until the installment of the present dome in the 1860’s, *this* was the design that overlooked Washington, D.C. (Gugliotta 2012, 183-185). Jefferson absolutely adored the Pantheon. In his later years, when reflecting on the Classical architectural legacy, he said:

“It is the most perfect and august temple, which was ever erected by the hand of man. This building has stood about seventeen hundred years, as a monument of the taste and munificence of the Romans.”

In later correspondence to a variety of American worthies, he would continually stress the physical ‘perfection’ of the ancient structure. To Jefferson and others, the Pantheon was more than just stunning. It was one of humanity’s earliest examples of successful scientific construction. From its various measurements to the quality of its materials, this was a building that was designed to last, not because it embraced the supernatural, but because it employed preparation, reason and balance (Adams Letter 1785).

Certain divorce from the supernatural and an embrace of balance of reason were directly on Jefferson’s mind when he designed *The Rotunda* at the University of Virginia. Its form, scope and size would be on par with that of the Pantheon that inspired it, albeit constructed with marble and red brick. Like Thornton’s Capitol, it too would be designed to be a sort of geographical ‘anchor.’ A structure so well balanced and dominating that there would be little doubt it was the *omphalos*, or spiritual/psychological center of the institution. Students would see it daily, from distances as they strolled to class, and intimately as they used it as their campus library and central event space (Wilson 2009, 34).

The Rotunda proved popular with not only staff and students but with most of America’s foremost architects. Frank Lloyd Wright called it “one of the most beautiful and harmonious buildings ever designed.” Modern architect I.M. Pei, who would go on to design his own iconic monuments in D.C., stated that it was “a building of timeless beauty and grace. It is a testament to the genius of Thomas Jefferson and the power of architecture to inspire and uplift.” It was this quality – the ability of the design to ‘inspire and uplift,’ that would lead to numerous imitations in the early 20th century, from the Mall in Washington, D.C. to some of America’s best known academic centers.

McKim’s Academic Pantheons

The majesty of the Roman Pantheon would continue to deeply inspire American architects well into the late 19th Century. America in the late 1800’s was no longer interested in considering itself a new version of Ancient Athens or the Roman Republic; this was now a nation with global influence, colonialization, and grandeur in mind. The nation, once characterized by a collection of a few state and small farm homesteads, had transitioned into an international industrial superpower. Unlike the sprawling, global British Empire, the United States was largely compact, contiguous and filled with citizens – not distant foreign subjects.

America’s growing colleges and universities regarded themselves as the core of this new global behemoth. Here, at these great centers of learning, Americans would be transformed, trained and sent out to remake parts of the globe in their own image. Additionally, these institutions were now flush with cash donated by an increasing cadre of wealthy alumni. If greatness was now the American birthright, its campuses would have to *look* the part.

At this point in the narrative enters an architect and his firm that specialized in Neoclassical monumental edifices: Charles McKim of McKim, Mead and White. From the late 1800’s to the early 20th Century, this famed partnership would design some of the most

monumental and memorable structures in America. Many of these buildings continue to dominate their respective landscapes, like the Boston Public Library.

But it would be in the academic architectural field that McKim and his partners would experience the most success. And on three occasions, in three different structures, McKim turned directly to the Roman Pantheon's exterior and interior design for inspiration. Also, all three structures still stand in all of their original glory, and continue to serve their respective institutions and the public at large – and like the Pantheon several have been *repurposed* over the decades. The structures are listed as follows. The first being the first being the Low Memorial Library (1895) on the Columbia Manhattan Campus, the second is the Gould Memorial Library on the 'Old Campus' of New York University in the Bronx (1900) (now a community college), and the third being the Wilson Library (1929) at the University of North Carolina.

Each structure would share numerous commonalities to the Pantheon – and each other. All would serve as their respective campus “anchors,” with such centrality that they were literally meant to dominate each day on their respective campuses. All would include a monumental neo-classical façade, either utilizing the Corinthian order (like the Pantheon) or the Ionic. Each would sport a broad yet tall dome and all interiors would be dominated by a *single spherical space* designed to literally *envelop* the visitor.

McKim's vision of the legacy of Rome in America was nearly a singular obsession. His ideas of Rome was that of a vast, balanced republic brimming with citizens, ideas and ‘great men of letters.’ In a 1905 speech he boasted:

“Ancient Rome became the ruler of the world by virtue, not of her legions, but by the might of her ideas. Today Rome rules us by the force of her spirit of law and order in the arts, making citizens of those who have the open mind to receive her teachings” (Moore 1929, 253).

Did McKim ever reflect on the realities of the ancient Roman state? Not publicly. Like most admirers of Roman Civilization, the Republic/Empire's reliance on violent conquest, tribute and slavery rarely (if ever) concerned him. Like Jefferson, he regarded the extensive university campus as a sort of ‘Academic Acropolis’ to be admired from afar and inhabited by mainly peaceful, if not ambitious scholars, students and rhetoricians (Moore 1929, 251-255).

While many styles of architecture have come and gone over the decades, much of McKim's Pantheon-inspired designs have garnered much praise. Jane Jacobs, the author of the influential 1961 book *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, praised the Low Library as one of the most “inviting” in Manhattan. Her praise would be echoed in the 21st Century by former U.S. President Barack Obama, who said, “The iconic Low Library is a testament to the university's commitment to excellence.”

McKim's Pantheon-inspired design would be so impactful it would even find its way onto official U.S. Postage. In 1954 the Post Office Department honored the iconic structure on a stamp, in honor of Columbia University's bicentennial commemoration (Colnect Website).

Other Inspirations and Interpretations of the Pantheon

After World War I, the Pantheon-As-Campus-Template model seemed to reign supreme. Numerous college and universities constructed their own interpretations, with some being more elaborate than others. Perhaps the most elaborate, large-scale ‘Academic Pantheon’ created during and after World War I was the ‘Social and Religion Building,’ or “SR” for short, on what is now the campus of Vanderbilt University (then Peabody College for Teachers) (Conklin, p. 188).

The influence of not only ancient Rome endured in its design, the legacy of Charles McKim loomed large as well. The building, meant to not only dominate the campus but serve

as its ‘architectural anchor,’ was designed by Ludlow and Peabody, a firm comprised of several architects that had studied and worked under McKim (Conklin, pgs. 188-89).

The influence of the Pantheon is apparent in the structure, but interestingly enough, it goes *beyond* other replications. Present, of course, was the monumental, broad dome which created a central rotunda and an impressive façade comprised of marble columns of the Corinthian Order. Additionally, on each side were matching Corinthian niches that were the ‘hallmark’ of the Ancient Pantheon’s *interior*. It was almost as if the architects wanted to leave no doubt that this new structure was their interpretation of its Roman inspiration, inside and out (Conklin, p. 190).

The SR was designed as the campus hub as well, fitted with its large central rotunda for campus ceremonies like convocations and graduations, classrooms and an auditorium. Additionally it had several ‘MPR’ or “multipurpose rooms” as its designers wanted it adapted to the likes of each campus class for generations to come. In a way, this was also in line with the Pantheon’s design, as it was designed to be flexible in its daily uses (Conklin, pgs. 190-193). After World War I, many architects intentionally ‘retired’ the neoclassical style. The 1920’s and 30’s, after all, are justifiably identified with the glory of the Art Deco Style. This new style did incorporate some of the features of neoclassicism, like an emphasis on symmetry and monumentalism, but discarded others – especially details like fluted columns that followed the original ‘Greco-Roman’ orders. The style embraced the forms of the machine age, and employed a variety of materials such as shiny metals and mathematical geometric patterns and forms. Obvious campus-based examples can be found in the Oregon State Capitol Complex and the ‘Cathedral of Learning’ at the University of Pittsburgh (Bayer 1999, 78-81, 197).

Yet the “Pantheonic” model endured, and in 1930 rose perhaps the last of these grand replicas, this time on the campus of Syracuse University. Hendricks’ Chapel was constructed as a testament to the ecumenical and cultural needs of the university. Named for a former New York Senator, the familiar form of the Pantheon was certainly present, though the heft of the building was certainly a level down from its predecessors, particularly Low Memorial Library (Phillips 2005, 20-22).

Conclusion

Eternally useful, adaptable, gloriously decorated inside and out, and blessed with a dome that nearly defies the laws of physics, the Pantheon is one of the foremost structures of humanity. Though ancient, it remains remarkably intact and practical as architects over the ages have competed with each other to replicate or transform it in some way. Architects have been utilizing the Pantheon’s design for centuries, and in America perhaps this effort is most visible on our many college campuses. Jefferson himself found the building so mesmerizing he not only modeled his monumental home after it but also the Rotunda Building, which continues to dominate the University of Virginia’s Campus. Today, architectural forms and styles have come and gone on our college campuses. From Neo-classical to Art Deco to Bauhaus to Brutalist, these structures testify to the power of the human mind to imagine new spaces for critical thinking, conversation and inspiration. Even today, we are sure that architects are not done with their own interpretations of the Pantheon.

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