

One hundred feet and a spiral stair: the problem of designing Trajan's Column

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Introduction

In Greek architecture, discrepancies with respect to prevailing conventions show that designs were not always completely worked out before construction began.¹ Yet in the context of Roman architecture problems of this nature are rarely broached, in part because of the legendary capabilities of Roman architects and builders, in part because it is difficult for us to know exactly what they would have wished to achieve. Roman architects worked to no such well defined code as that represented by the Doric order from the 6th to 4th c. B.C. Nor do we possess the kind of documentation that permits Renaissance historians to compare, for example, Palladio's projects in their published and their built versions.

The comparison of the two halves of a symmetrical building may yield valuable information about operations on site. The Baths of Caracalla has anomalies on one side which seem to result from the misinterpretation of instructions which produced correct work on the other side.² That does not, however, tell us much about the way in which the design itself was produced. A better opportunity is given by comparing the 'twin' columns of Trajan and of Marcus Aurelius, precisely because they are not genuine twins (figs.1-4). Marcus' Column, erected about 70 years later, was a thoughtful, full-size reinterpretation of Trajan's. The later architect reproduced only what he most admired while introducing modifications where appropriate; in this way he left behind a unique contemporary critique of Trajan's Column. An understanding of what is similar and what is different between the two gives the key to the original ideas that lay behind their design and where, in the case of Trajan's, they went adrift. For other reasons too Trajan's Column is an excellent subject for architectural analysis. It is well preserved and perhaps the least altered of all Roman structures, having survived the ravages of time and man far better than most. Lastly, ancient written sources provide information on the ideas behind its design and hint at the identity of its architect.³

Trajan's Column is best known for the spiral (more accurately, helical) relief depicting the Dacian wars. Yet the Column was not merely a vehicle for sculpture, and the evidence suggests that the relief was both the last feature to be executed⁴ and the last to be designed. The structure of the Column must have been substantially complete upon its dedication in 113, but the relief was probably added by Hadrian after 118, following the Senate's decision to concede to Trajan's remains the unprecedented honour of burial inside the *pomerium*, in the pedestal itself. Trajan's Column, then, was conceived less as a piece of sculpture and more as a work of architecture that came to be further embellished.⁵ If Trajan's Column was not originally intended to be a tomb, or a vehicle for relief sculpture, what was it? It seems to be a conflation of various architectural models: the free-standing honorific Column, like those in the Forum Romanum; the stair-tower or *bebevedere*, like the lighthouse of Alexandria; and the obelisk. The relevance of the obelisk as a source of inspiration would have been more obvious in antiquity, for in Egypt the traditional placement of obelisks was hard up against important buildings (albeit usually in pairs), rather than in the centre of a large open space.

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- 1 J. J. Coulton, "Incomplete preliminary planning in Greek architecture," *Le dessin d'architecture dans les sociétés antiques* (Strasbourg 1984) 103-21.
 - 2 J. DeLaine, *Design and construction in Roman imperial architecture. The baths of Caracalla in Rome* (Ph.D. diss, Univ. of Adelaide 1992) I, 104 ff.
 - 3 Ancient sources mention Apollodorus as the designer of the forum, and the Column would reasonably have come under his control.
 - 4 P. Rockwell, cited in article by A. Claridge p.5, note 6.
 - 5 Claridge, *passim*.