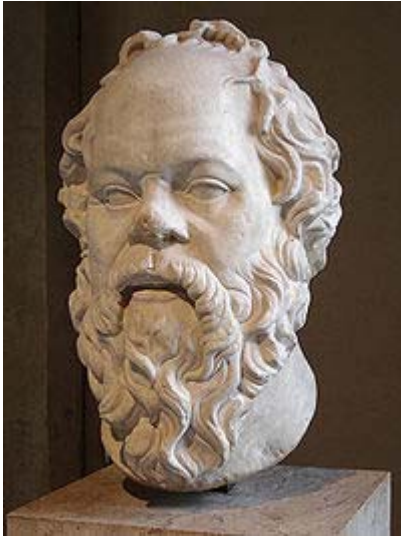


More Than a Pediment and Six Columns

by Saxon Sigerson, AIA

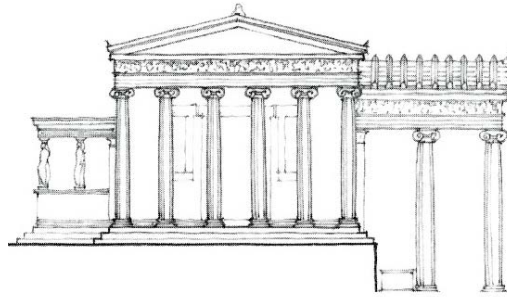
I am working on a homework assignment from a friend; to take a question about architecture and through an investigation, evolve that question into a "better question". This is, in part, known as the Socratic Method of philosophical inquiry. Being the literal fellow that I am, I have decided to go back to Socrates' time and look for a question.



Socrates 469 – 399 B.C.E..

The history books come off the shelf, pages are turned and My oh my! What do we have here but some pretty pithy looking buildings. Strange, I have the uneasy feeling that I have seen parts of these buildings somewhere before. Yes, my firm grip of the obvious does not desert me when I see this stack of images at right. We architects have been copying, interpreting and generally having our way with the classical building language for the last 2,500 years.

Now for the beginning question of our Socratic investigation, which will be dramatically staged as a dialogue when Architect A looks upon drawings made by Architect B of the front elevation for a car wash on Marconi Avenue right here in Sacramento. "You can't be serious! Are you really putting an architrave with egg-and-dart moldings on top of ionic columns (made from expanded polystyrene) at the entry portal to the Auto Blow Dry? Don't you have one creative bone in your 6b lead holding fingers?" Well, I guess that is actually two questions. You get my point? Why, after the upheaval of Post Modernism, Michael Graves and all, would we consider using this Greek stuff again? Wow! Now that is three questions. Someone please hand me a sharp red pencil and let us proceed with some serious looking.



Grecian Erechtheion 421 B.C. (In Athens)



Pantheon 120 A.D. (In Rome)



S. Maria Maggiore 1566 A.D. (In Venice)

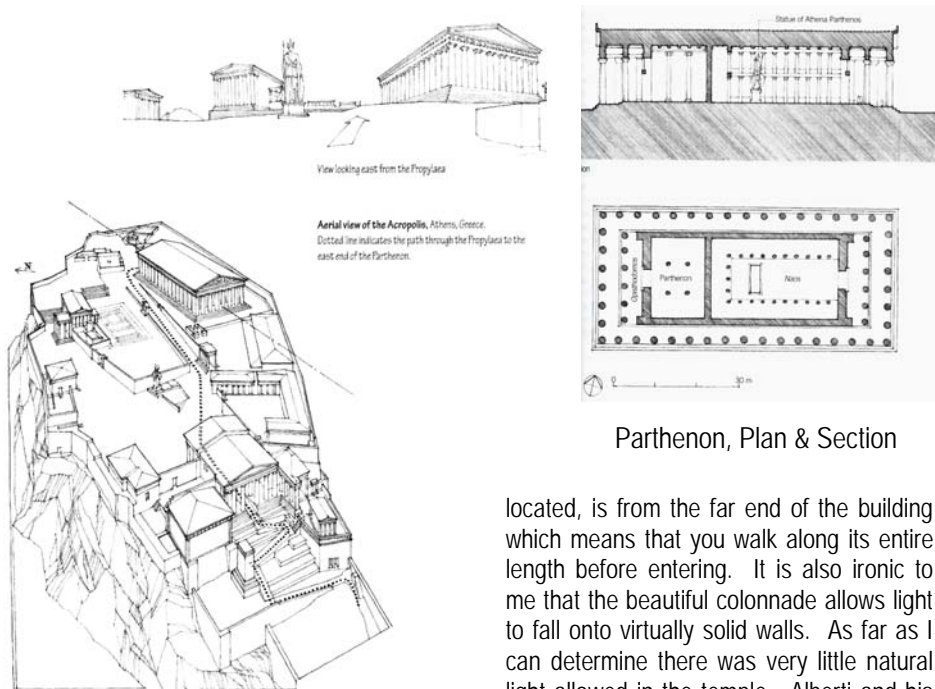


Tennessee State Capitol 1845 A.D.
(In Nashville)



Entry To The Propylaea In Athens
From *Classical Greek Architecture*

It is easy from this vantage point in time to be glib about the derivative nature of the stream of western architecture which, up until the middle of the 19th century did not have much in the way of tributaries or side branches. Of course Gothic Architecture was a major exception to that generality. I was jogged out of my smirky attitude by an encounter with a very fine book by Alexander Tzonis and Phoebe Giannisi entitled *Classical Greek Architecture-The Construction of the Modern*. What is unique about this book is the stunning imagery such as the photograph of the Propylaea, which is the entry building to the Acropolis in Athens. We view this image and see a Greek building as more than a cute diagram of six slim cylinders topped by a decorated triangle. Now it is a place with light and shadow, enormous mass and fine details. We look at the worn steps and feel the spirits of the thousands of human beings who having passed through its doors.



Parthenon, Plan & Section

gable end to a pitched roof. It is not as though they invented this form but rather ennobled it with their refinements. Also a footnote here for my construction document buddies; the roof pitch appears to be a 3/12 for all the buildings I measured from my books.

If you look to the left of the Parthenon, in the aerial view, you will see another building called the Erechtheion. This is a tasty one. It has such grit and a complex richness in plan, section and elevation. Erectheus was the mythical founder of Athens and the arbiter in a contest of gifts to the city between Poseidon and Athena as they vied for the right to be honored by the city. This building wraps up this mythical narrative into a single composition. Its pinwheel plan with two floor levels, four entrances and enclosed court is a great statement on handling site and program complexity. The Caryatid porch on the right in the photo has statues of women acting as the supporting columns. This building is also the only Greek building I have found using engaged columns, seen in the middle of the photo below, which contradicts my position that it was not until the Romans, that we got pilasters (half engaged columns) on classical buildings. I contend this was one of the big moves that diluted the classical language as structural elements could be used in essentially decorative ways. Think expanded polystyrene from your favorite local supplier of "shapes and forms" glued to a building before the final stucco coat goes on. Not so tasty.

located, is from the far end of the building which means that you walk along its entire length before entering. It is also ironic to me that the beautiful colonnade allows light to fall onto virtually solid walls. As far as I can determine there was very little natural light allowed in the temple. Alberti and his lovely Saint Andrea (in Mantua, Italy ca 1470) with its big oculus would have cringed at this design feature. Fortunately his sketch book sojourn only made it as far as Rome, where the Pantheon and its oculus was located. Apparently in the Greek world, the gods were meant to be shrouded in darkness and perhaps even smoke to reduce the intensity of being in their presence.

Let us also note that technically this temple pediment that has been used and abused for so long, existed before and after the golden age of the Greek temple as the

The Acropolis In Athens

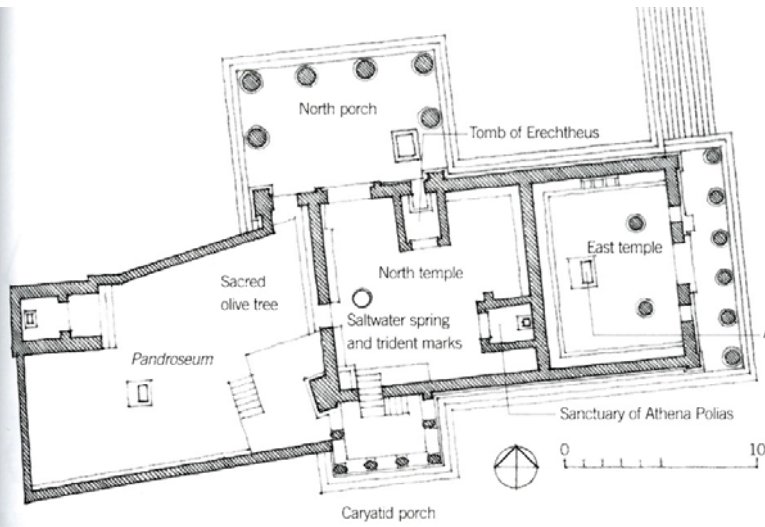
This aerial view drawn by Frank Ching (who also drew the images on the previous page) is a good beginning for our annotated survey. A profound aspect of the Acropolis' design is the eventful route to the temples. We first need to understand that this site, known as a Temenos and located on the hill overlooking Athens, was primarily dedicated to Athena in her various guises and that a festival known as the Panathenaia was held each year on her birthday around July. The climax of the celebration was a procession of citizens from the Agora below to the top of the Acropolis.

The eventfulness goes as follows. The buildings on the hill slowly sank from view as the procession reached the bottom of the escarpment. Then a zig zag path up the hill, a gate and a massive ramp leading into the Propylaea which served as a portal as well as containing a banquet hall on one side and a smaller room on the south side which led to the Temple of Athena Nike. Upon leaving the Propylaea a wide angle view of the Acropolis is presented.

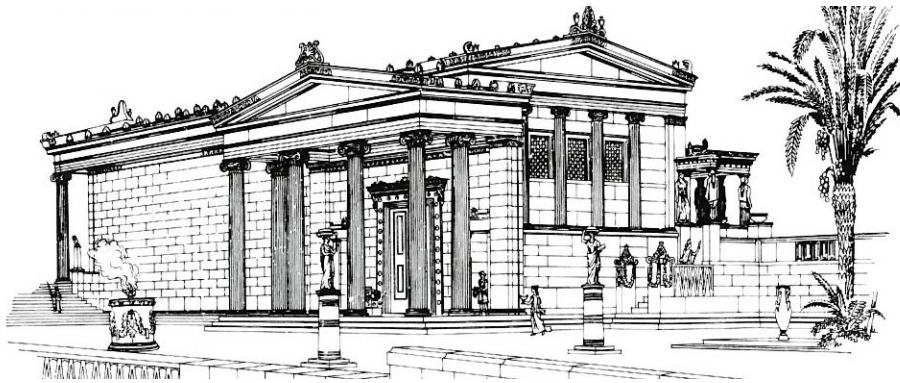
It has been noted before that the viewpoint from the Propylaea to the Parthenon is an oblique one which allows one to see and understand the entire form of the building. This concept has been put to use in such locations as the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, Corbusier's Ronchamp and Philip Johnson's Glass House to name a few. Notice that within the Parthenon, the entry to the Naos, where the statue of Athena is



The Erechtheion On The Acropolis



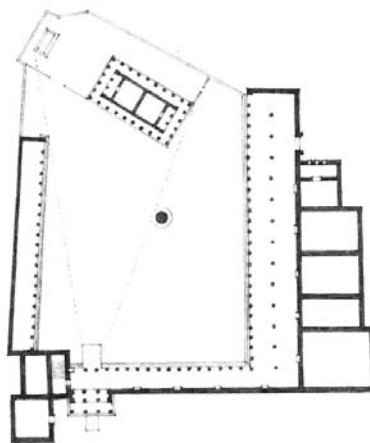
Plan Of The Erechtheion



Reconstructed View Of The Erechtheion

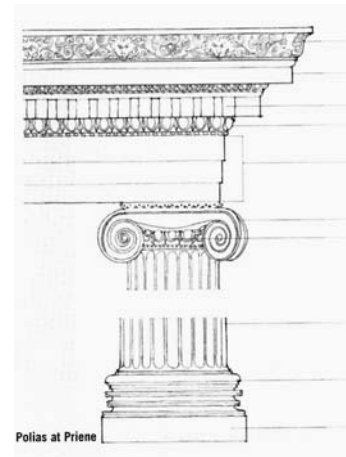
The overall building form as seen in the reconstructed view above, is not so elegant. That big porch coming off to the left, on the north side, really looks like an after thought to me. Good news to some of us; that even the Greek architects clunked it up once in a while. A cool project could be to take the plan and design a better building from it. If you make a flat roof scenario it begins to look pretty fine to my eye.

As I moved on, exploring some of the agora plans, I found there was a consistent strategy of oblique geometries. As noted before, you get dynamic views created this way. It would seem so straight forward to square things up yet they were thinking differently about this in a sophisticated way. The Romans did not do this much at all, they liked things true and square, which helps make a case for them being imitators and not innovators. I actually disagree with that view. In this area of design, as we look at Hadrian's Villa (118 A.D.), near Rome, note the inventiveness they had to bring to their drafting table in resolving all that crazy geometry into spaces that had virtually no oblique views.

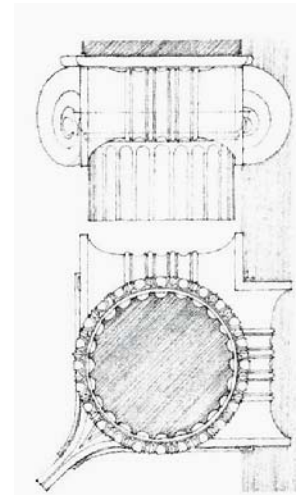


Sacred Precinct of Athena, Pergamon, Asia Minor 400 B.C.

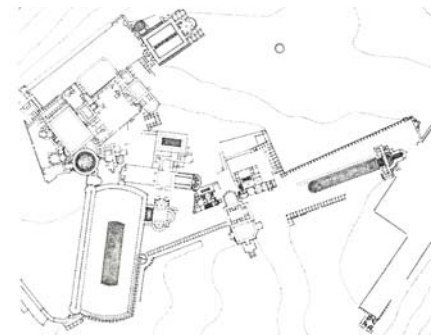
With all the scholarship that has come before this moment, it is daunting to produce original thoughts on Greek architecture. My slight of hand is to produce questions. Beyond imitating the imagery that was most relevant to their time and culture, what can we take away from classical design solutions and bring to bear on the modern dilemma of making relevant buildings and cities for people of our time?



The Beauty Of The Ionic Order



Plan And Elevation of the Ionic Order



Hadrian's Villa Tivoli, Italy 118 A.D.

More than focusing on detailed design ideas, as I have here, this question asks us to understand how classical architecture expressed the core values of that culture and use that insight in shaping our current work.

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