

# Architectural Elements—the Column

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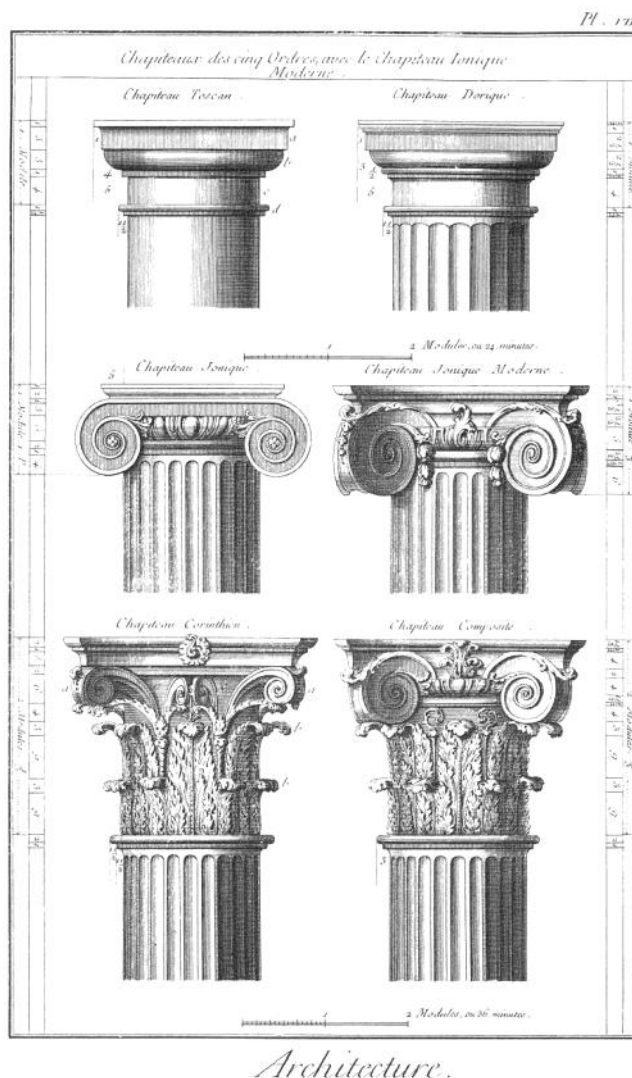
*This is the inaugural installment of “Elements,” a new architectural history-focused column in Foot-Prints. In this issue we are talking about a fundamental element of architecture: the column (yes, this will be a column on columns)!*

The column was initially developed to support weight-bearing loads in construction. Ancient Persians and Egyptians, among others, used interior posts or columns to support the roofs of their buildings, which is known as “post-and-lintel” construction. In fact, the Egyptians modeled their columns after bundles of sticks used to support the reed-covered roofs of vernacular residences along the Nile. The pharaohs’ impressive temples, a far cry from the huts of the common folk, were carved to resemble these bundles of sticks, as well as native lotus and papyrus buds and blooms.

The Ancient Greeks took it one step further, using columns as exterior elements. Little did they know that they would set an architectural precedent for millennia to come. Even the Romans, who moved away from post-and-lintel construction by innovating engineering techniques using concrete, arches, and vaulting, used exterior columns as a predominant decorative element. During this period, the Classical orders of architecture were developed, which were most completely described by Roman engineer Vitruvius in his treatise on architecture, appropriately titled *De Architectura*. Vitruvius explains the orders as we generally know them today: Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Composite, and Tuscan.

## Parts of a Column

Before we get into each order, it is important to understand the components of a column. Columns are made of three



*Classical Orders, as published in an 18th century French encyclopedia. Clockwise from upper left: Tuscan, Doric, Modern Ionic, Composite, Corinthian, and Ionic.*

basic parts: the bottommost element is the base, upon which the remainder of the column rests; the middle portion of the column is the shaft; and the topmost element is the capital, which rests atop the shaft.

## The Doric Order

Originating in mainland Greece as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Doric order is characterized by a sturdy appearance, simple capital, and lack of a base. The

column sits directly on the ground or foundation, and its shaft—which is typically fluted—is wider at the bottom, slightly tapering toward the top. The capital is round, consisting of a circular necking with a square abacus that connects it to the larger entablature. Due to its visual heaviness and strength, Vitruvius associated the Doric Order with masculine virtues.

## The Ionic Order

More complex than the Doric that preceded it, the Ionic Order first appeared in Ionia in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The order is characterized by the scrolled volutes that decorate each corner of its capital. The fluted shaft is slenderer than that of the Doric Order, requiring a base that tends to be simple in form. Because of its slim form and volutes that resembled ringlets, Vitruvius attributed femininity—specifically that of the matron or married woman—to the Ionic Order.

## The Corinthian Order

The most ornate of the orders, the Corinthian was the last to develop in Greece, first appearing in Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> century

BCE. It consists of slender fluted columns set atop a simple base. The capital is richly adorned with stylized acanthus leaves and scrolls. Vitruvius also drew parallels between the Corinthian Order and femininity; however, unlike the more restrained and refined Ionic Order, the highly-decorated Corinthian was instead associated with a youthful and smartly-accessorized maiden.

## The Composite Order

## Architectural Elements—the Column (continued)

As its name suggests, the Composite Order is a combination of earlier architectural orders. It appeared in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and is characterized by a capital that mixes Ionic volutes with Corinthian acanthus leaves. Aside from its capital, a Composite column follows the conventions of the Corinthian Order.

### *The Tuscan Order*

Invented by architects and architectural theorists of the Italian Renaissance, the Tuscan Order is viewed as a return to simplicity. Essentially, the details of its capital and shaft demonstrate a stripped-down version of that of the Doric Order, featuring a simple capital and smooth, unfluted columns. It differs from the Doric in its proportions, instead mirroring the slender form of the Ionic.

### *Evolution of the Column*

Classical columns fell out of favor as the more complex and structurally-flexible forms of the Gothic and Byzantine styles gained popularity. However, they reemerged during the Renaissance period and have remained a common stylistic feature in architecture ever since.

### *Columns in Reno*

In Reno, we typically see Classically-inspired columns used as porch supports in Colonial Revival and Neoclassical Revival style buildings. As with any revival style, these columns are not exact copies of Greek and Roman



*Corinthian style columns grace the Washoe County Courthouse.*



*The Levy House (Sundance Book Store) displays a variation on Ionic columns.*



*The Giraud-Hardy House porch is supported by Tuscan columns.*

precedents. They have been modified to suit modern tastes and aesthetics, and do not strictly adhere to the rigorous proportions prescribed by architectural theorists of Ancient Rome and Renaissance Europe. Most of these are modified Ionic, Corinthian, and Tuscan columns. I have yet to identify Doric columns on a building in Reno, but that doesn't necessarily mean they aren't out there.

Ionic columns can be found on the Levy House (Sundance Bookstore), as well as the Dexter-McLaughlin House, both of which are situated on California Avenue. The Washoe County Courthouse, designed by Frederic DeLongchamps, demonstrates Corinthian style columns. Tuscan columns are the most prolific style in Reno, and grace high-profile buildings such as the Giraud-Hardy House (Arte Italia) as well as modest residences throughout our historic neighborhoods.

Is there an architectural element that you've always wondered about? If so, send HRPS a letter or an email, and your suggestion may be used in a future installment of this column.

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## New Date for Membership Renewals

Your HRPS Board has approved changing our "fiscal year" and our membership renewals to the calendar year January 1 to December 31 from its current July 1 to June 30. We've found it too complex to have membership renewals in the middle of our busiest months—the June and July Walking Tours. So, how will this affect you as a renewing member?

- Your renewal date has been extended 6 months for free — check your mailing label on *FootPrints*.
- You will actually get an 18-month "year" this renewal period — but just this once.
- Fall *FootPrints*, which arrives about August 20, will have a separate membership renewal form inside. Renewals will now be due on January 1.