Throughout most of human history, societies spent relatively little on buildings and fixed infrastructure. The dwellings where the population lived and carried on business were generally constructed over short periods of time out of inexpensive earthen or plant materials. Parts of these structures could be dismantled and carried to a new location if the community moved. Even those residing in more sedentary settlements exhibited little appetite for investing in more durable structures. In many places and over time, something changed, and people began to put additional resources into a varied group of buildings and infrastructure designed for longevity. What drove them to make such a decision?

Architectural history textbooks seldom treat this issue. Instead their authors focus on game-changing pieces of architecture usually in the “West,” defined as Europe (from Greek and Roman times to the present) and the United States from its founding as a nation. It is only through implication that the reader can come to some conclusion about what parts of the built environment the culture wished to preserve. To be sure, over the last few decades architectural historians interested in vernacular buildings (erected by their occupants or local craftsmen in a regional style) and the architecture of Africa, Asia, or the indigenous populations of the Americas have criticized what they consider their field’s preoccupation with the West’s monumental architecture. Their discoveries have substantially changed what we know about the built environment of past societies. Not surprisingly, they have produced more in the way of explanations for building impermanence than for permanence.1

Providing reasons for why a society chooses continually to rebuild in low cost materials or not build at all does not necessarily reveal why they change course. Those studying topics other than architecture per se – histories of communities, urbanization, economic development, and the environment – have most often taken up the issue of investment and durability, though they do not tend to offer the kind of knowledge of structures that architectural histories furnish.

This overview aims to suggest the range of knowledge currently existing about the built environment in the early modern era, specifically from c. 1500 to c. 1800. As will become evident, though scholars have opened up a variety of new approaches in recent years, the subject remains undeveloped, in large part because it is difficult to conceptualize a scholarly field that is global in range and seeks to embrace a wide variety of architectural projects. Still, the outlines have now emerged, and sufficient case studies exist to provide an overview.

The Saga of Monumental Architecture in the Medieval and Early Modern West

Most scholars who have written about architectural developments in Europe between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance find very little in the way of buildings meant to be long lasting other than sacred sites or fortifications – architecture designed to save your soul or save your life. Because traditional architectural histories tend to treat only those building meant to be permanent, they have often ignored impermanent structures. Pages in architectural treatises on the medieval period almost exclusively feature the gargantuan cathedrals and other religious buildings erected

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