The Triumphal Arch: Evidence of Roman Influence in Newport Beach

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The Newport Coast arches are two isolated monuments that stand out among the Spanish architecture of Southern California. Although they appear to have no purpose except as mere decoration, their basic form alludes to an imitation of more ancient structures. In fact, the free-standing arch was a popular motif in Roman society and was used in connection with military victories, the founding of colonies, the construction of roads and bridges, and the celebration of the lives and deaths of the imperial family. Most importantly, these monuments were used as a means of propaganda to announce the “presence of Rome, its laws, and its culture,” thereby strengthening the power of the Emperor throughout the Empire (Kleiner, 196). Many years later, the images of power associated with arches built during the Republican and Imperial periods of Rome were recognized and adapted by Italian and French Renaissance rulers who wished to strengthen their status as absolute rulers. This example demonstrates the possibility of utilizing the ideals of authority associated with these monuments of classical antiquity even while modifying their form and function to fit very different political, social, and economic atmospheres. In modern times, the Newport Coast arches rely on the general public’s awareness of the principles of wealth, power, and education associated with structures of classical antiquity, even while altering this form to create a gateway that separates this exclusive area from the rest of the city, thereby celebrating the economic success of an entire group of people.

The function of the arch in Roman society varied depending on the political climate. It is thought that the origin of the arch occurred from the technique of inserting vaulted gateways into fortifications (Anderson, 263). Early arches were referred to as fornix and were generally paid for and put up by the honoree himself. Many were simply
commemorative or honorific arches bearing statues that were erected in tribute of wealthy patrons. In addition, votive arches were constructed that were “associated with sanctuaries and crowned by images of divinities” (Kleiner, 196). Therefore, arches were not only constructed to celebrate the individual, but also as religious structures meant to emphasize the beliefs of the people. As time passed, arches began to have a much more propagandistic purpose in celebrating the achievements of various rulers; the first fornix that was constructed in association with a military victory was built in 120 B.C. to honor Quintus Fabius Maximus. It was set up in the civic center of Rome, marking the entrance to the forum Romanum (Zaho, 19). This shift in function was especially evident when Rome changed from a Republic to an Empire.

With the advent of a new political atmosphere, the function of the arch changed and became especially associated with military victories. In fact, “in its evolution from a private Republican monument to an Imperial honorific one, the arch and its decoration, acquired a specifically propagandistic role” (Zaho, 19). Even the word fornix changed to arcus as an adjustment in policy dictated by Augustus stated that only an Emperor could be granted a triumphal procession during which arches were used (Zaho, 18). The triumphal procession was a traditional parade route taken by generals celebrating their victory upon conclusion of military expeditions (Anderson, 264). After 190 B.C. arches in Rome were usually erected across the triumphal route and were “built and decorated to honor and mark these events” (Zaho, 18). After the policy of Augustus was decreed, the function of triumphal arches changed from reinforcing the great actions of generals to highlighting the “grand military accomplishments of the emperors” (Anderson, 265). Yet in 2 B.C., arches to Drusus and Germanicus marked a return to the commemorative
Now, however, they were erected almost anywhere in the city to celebrate any appropriate action or person. Therefore, arches became much more common and were important landmarks and elements of decoration in Imperial Rome. Because of this, the function of the arch was extended to include markers of important gateways and passages in the city (Anderson, 264-265). Outside of Rome, monuments were erected in response to the founding of colonies, the construction of roads and bridges, the death of a member of the imperial family, and the naming of successors (Kleiner, 197).

According to Margaret Zaho, Professor of Art History at the University of Central Florida:

The monumental decorated triumphal arch became a significant and immediately recognizable emblem of the power of the Empire. Its role, particularly outside of the city of Rome and even more so outside of Italy, was to announce and demarcate the presence of the Emperor and the laws of the state (Zaho, 19-20).

The perceptions of political power and Empire associated with the arch in ancient Rome were recognized by later Italian and French rulers who were interested in the rediscovery of antique learning. The triumphal arch and triumphal procession were particularly thought of as influential bearers of meaning which reflected the glory of classical antiquity (Zaho, 1). The fact that many Roman arches were still a present and visible part of the landscape during the Renaissance period made certain the influence of this imagery which had connotations of power, victory, and splendor (Sear, 1). Because the surviving arches displayed so much information about the triumphal procession and about the form of the triumphal imagery itself, they were relatively uniform models to follow in building new monuments (Zaho, 3). The function of these structures in military
processions was reintroduced with the entry into Naples of the victorious King Alfonso I, as this event was memorialized in an arch. Although the triumphal form of the arch was especially popular, changes were often made to the form of these structures, especially with the building of temporary arches out of lath and plaster, so that they could be used in civic rituals. (Sear, 1). Not only was the structure of the arch altered to be used in association with the entrance of royal personages, but more importantly, it was changed to incorporate the religious beliefs of the time.

It is significant that rulers of the Renaissance period were able to alter the form of the Roman arch in order to utilize these monuments for an entirely propagandistic role complete with religious connotations. Although there were Roman arches associated with divinities, most that honored individuals did not employ religious imagery. During the Medieval period, the triumphal Imperial procession was replaced by Papal triumphs which “recalled classic notions of power, honor, and splendor” and chose to honor God instead of a specific ruler (Zaho, 27). Through these events, triumphal imagery such as the arch became “imbued with a Christian meaning and purpose” (Zaho, 28). This association continued to be prevalent in the time of the Renaissance, especially as rulers looked to religion for justification of their role as absolute monarchs. Therefore, during the Renaissance, “The triumphal motif as a decorative component on honorific monuments incorporated political propaganda with religious rites and Imperial power” (Zaho, 4). The imagery present on the arch combined religious principles with individual accomplishments and therefore adapted the ancient structure to a Christian environment. In this way, the arch was much more relevant and effective for a setting that varied from ancient Rome in politics and religion.
The fact that the form of the arch found during the Renaissance reflected in society demonstrates an awareness that the Roman structures did so as well. The column arrangements and proportions of the early ancient arches varied greatly, demonstrating that this structure was still in its developmental stage. Honorific arches consisted of a single-bay (opening) or a triple-bay; both forms were seen in the Republican and Imperial time periods. As the Imperial period advanced, the ornamentation on the arches grew progressively more elaborate. Basic elements such as moldings, cornices (a horizontal molded projection that crowns or completes a building or wall), and columns became more detailed, while decorations developed into more intricate forms. Specifically for triumphal arches, the ornamentation was meant to depict and celebrate the triumph and the “triumphator” (Zaho, 20). In fact, the decorations were used to record the triumphal procession and therefore to continually remind the population of instances of glory and victory of great generals and Emperors. One example of this is found in the arch of Titus in Rome which was built in 81 A.D. to honor the victory of Titus over a Jewish revolt. The most common decoration of a triumphal arch is the relief, or a projection of figures or forms from a flat background. The arch of Titus is a single-bay with reliefs just over the passageway, recording the actual triumphal procession of this Emperor (Figure 1). These decorations include Titus driving a horse drawn chariot with a winged victory behind who crowns his head with a laurel wreath (Figure 2). On the opposite side of these two figures are depictions of soldiers holding the spoils of war (Figure 3). In fact, the reliefs are so specific that they “echo the actual directional movement of the procession that led from the Colosseum toward the Capitol” (Zaho, 21). As time passed, the form and position of decorations on arches became relatively standardized. The top of the arch
usually contained a bronze sculptural group depicting the triumphal chariot and the “triumphator” (Zaho, 23). The attic, or top, portion of the monument contained an inscription naming the victor, his military success, and a statement that the senate approved of the arch. Just below the cornice was a depiction of the actual triumphal procession; the areas surrounding the passageway were set aside for figures of winged victories. All details worked together to create a monument dedicated to reminding the spectator of the power of the Emperor and the wealth and splendor of the triumphal procession. As Professor Zaho states, “it acts as a huge politically motivated billboard intended to convey messages about honor, conquest, victory, power, domestic wealth and security, and eternity” (Zaho, 25).

The specific form of the Roman arch served as a relatively uniform model for artists during the Renaissance period as many were still present throughout the former Roman Empire. Because the function of the arch was often changed to fit a more temporary purpose, impermanent monuments were built of lath and plaster. In addition to the newer materials used to construct these arches, the structure and decoration changed as well. One example of this is the arch of Alfonso I, constructed between 1450 and 1486. Although it was modeled on antique structures, it was not free-standing and was constructed of two arches one on top of another. From the beginning, it was intended to be a triumphal gateway in honor of Alfonso and had a Gothic-inspired design that was later replaced by a much more classic looking model. Because this arch was to serve as a gateway to Alfonso’s Castle Nuovo, it was constructed of white marble instead of a more temporary material. Although much of the design of the arch was based on a compilation of antique models, the detailed imagery reflects the social landscape of the Renaissance
era, including particular ways of dressing, the musical instruments used in the modern triumphal procession, as well as Christian ideals. For example, instead of winged victories, there are four large female statues of Justice, Temperance, Fortitude, and Prudence, which reflect specific religious values (Zaho, 54-55).

The example of the modified arch used during the Renaissance demonstrates the way in which this image of power can be adapted to fit very different social, political, and economic circumstances than those found in ancient Rome. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Newport Coast of California is highlighted by two freestanding arches on the corners of Pacific Coast Highway and Newport Coast Drive. Although the structure of these monuments has been altered, there is still a reflection of Roman architecture and especially the architecture of the most ancient arches. The earliest monuments were generally the most simple, coming before the advent of highly detailed triumphal imagery. This simplicity is reflected in the fact that the Newport Coast arches have a single-bay opening (Figure 9). There are elements of an attic, or a story above the cornice of a classical façade, which extends slightly over the rest of the arch (Figure 6). Similar to the ancient structures, there is an inscription placed directly above any design or decoration and is relief like in the fact that it protrudes from the background of the arch. However, it is in this lettering of “Newport Coast” that the first elements of modification are seen. Instead of naming a specific person and that person’s great deeds, the words refer only to a place. This immediately emphasizes the fact that the arches serve no political or propagandistic purpose meant to create support for a ruler. Other differences include two free standing columns flanking both sides of the center arch, which are of Toscana design in their simplicity (Figure 7). However, these columns are
not round, but square in construction. This modification allows the arches to co-exist with the highly angular Spanish architecture of the surrounding environment. In no way are these changes accidental; too many differences with neighboring architecture would create monuments that are too obvious in their message of drawing attention to the area. In order to continue the theme of simplicity found in these monuments, there is a limited amount of decoration and detail found on their surfaces. On both sides of the center arch is a carved out circle; over the arch is a small rectangular piece protruding from the background (Figure 6). These dramatically different decorations as opposed to their ancient counterparts are necessary because the two arches are not meant to honor a specific individual and therefore cannot include depictions of figures.

Other differences in the architecture of the Newport Coast arches as opposed to the models upon which they are based serve to emphasize distinctions in the social and economic environment of the area from ancient Rome and from Orange County in general. Instead of using material such as limestone or marble, the arches were created with a light form of concrete meant to generate the effect of much richer material than it actually is. This creates a sort of “Disney” effect where a substantial entity is created with nonsubstantial materials. This is further highlighted by the fact that these arches have no specific function. Unlike Roman triumphal structures, the Newport Coast monuments are not meant to be traveled under or used during a triumphal procession. In fact, this change reflects the recognition that the monuments will be much more visible to the general public if they can be viewed by car. In order to further ensure that the larger community will be conscious of these structures, they are surrounded by trees which contrast in color
and create the awareness of a secluded area behind the arches which is not available to the average passerby (Figure 9).

While certain elements of the Roman arches are changed in order to be more relevant to modern architectural forms and to a less individualized social function, the similarities between the ancient and modern structures make it evident that the Newport Coast monuments rely on the elements of power associated with the imagery of classical antiquity. While a specific person is not being celebrated, these modern arches very implicitly draw attention to a defined area: the Newport Coast. It is essential to note that this area is dominated by large homes; in fact, the median value of owner-occupied housing units as recorded in 2000 was $708,200, compared to a California average of $211,500 (State, 1). For Newport Coast in particular, most house prices range from $900,000 to $3 million (O’Dell, 1). This emphasizes the fact that there are definite distinctions between economic classes; the awareness of these distinction highlight the way in which the arches are meant to highlight economic success. Although there are homes priced as low as $300,000, the most elevated points of land are reserved for the largest mansions, thereby literally placing the economically well off above those with less money (O’Dell, 2). For Newport Beach as a whole, the median household income as recorded in 1999 was $83,455, almost twice as much as that of the California population in general. This is probably the direct result of the fact that 58.5 percent of the population of Newport Beach aged 25 years and older has a Bachelors degree or higher. The most astounding statistic of all, however, is the fact that as of 2000, 92.2 percent of the population in Newport Beach was white (State, 1). All of these details serve to emphasize the fact that this area is populated by a group of people that do not reflect the make-up of
California as a whole. Because of this, there is an element of exclusion involved in those who are able to live in the housing directly behind the Newport Coast arches. Therefore, these monuments serve as a gateway to Newport Coast Drive because of their position on either side of the street, reminding the public of the social and economic affluence associated with the area and celebrating the achievements of those that populate it.

Through the example of the Renaissance arches, it becomes evident that classical images of power and victory can be transformed and utilized depending on a specific social, political, and economic environment. Because of the influence of globalism in today’s world, examples of this imagery do not have to exist close by in order to be known about and mimicked. In fact, it is this interchange of global cultures that the architects of the Newport Coast arches relied on; these monuments would mean nothing if the general public wasn’t aware of the ideals of wealth, power, and education associated with structures of classical antiquity. By creating monuments that reflect global ideals of antiquity as well as local standards of economic success, the Newport Coast arches are effective in their purpose of honoring and setting apart a specific community of people.
Figure 1: Arch of Titus

<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/cc302k/images/Rome_images/webrome/ArchTitus.jpg>

Figure 2: The Triumphal Chariot of Titus

Figure 3: The Spoils of Jerusalem
Fig. 2: <http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivan/m/titus/arch.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivan/m/titus/titus.html&h=431&w=369&sz=131&tbmip=ylipp4SK5fUDUM: &tbnh=123&tbnw=105&hl=en&start=4&prev=/images%3Fq%3DArch%2Bof%2BTitus%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26lr%3Den%26start=4&prev=/images%3Fq%3DArch%2Bof%2BTitus%26svnum%3D10%26hl%3Den%26lr%3Den%3D1>  

Fig. 3: <http://www.jg-regensburg.de/graphics/arch-of-titus-spoils- jerusalem.jpg>  

Figure 4: Arch of Alfonso  
<http://www.napoli.com/english/castel.jpg>
Figure 5: Newport Coast Arch*

Figure 6: Newport Coast Arch, Attic*
**Figure 7:** Columns*

**Figure 8:** Side View*

**Figure 9:** Newport Coast Arch*
Works Cited


O'Dell, John. “Rooms With Views for a Million-Plus Housing.” *Los Angeles Times* 26 Nov. 1991


*All pictures of the Newport Coast Arches photographed by Alyssa Friesen