

A Neoclassical Saigon

This essay seeks to discuss Neoclassicism in France and its origin from the Renaissance, and how all that would influence French Colonial architecture in Saigon.

I. Renaissance

We have long concurred that Florence cradled the birth of Renaissance as early as the turn of the 14th century, which coincided with the 6th city wall being erected by Arnolfo di Cambio. The transition of this town from Medieval architecture is visible through traces of the rough ashlar from Romanesque and Lombardic traditions, which preceded the use of fine masonry and stucco in the Renaissance. Standing at the grandiose Piazza della Signoria gives you a clear observation on the contrast of the materials used in Palazzo Vecchio and Uffizi.



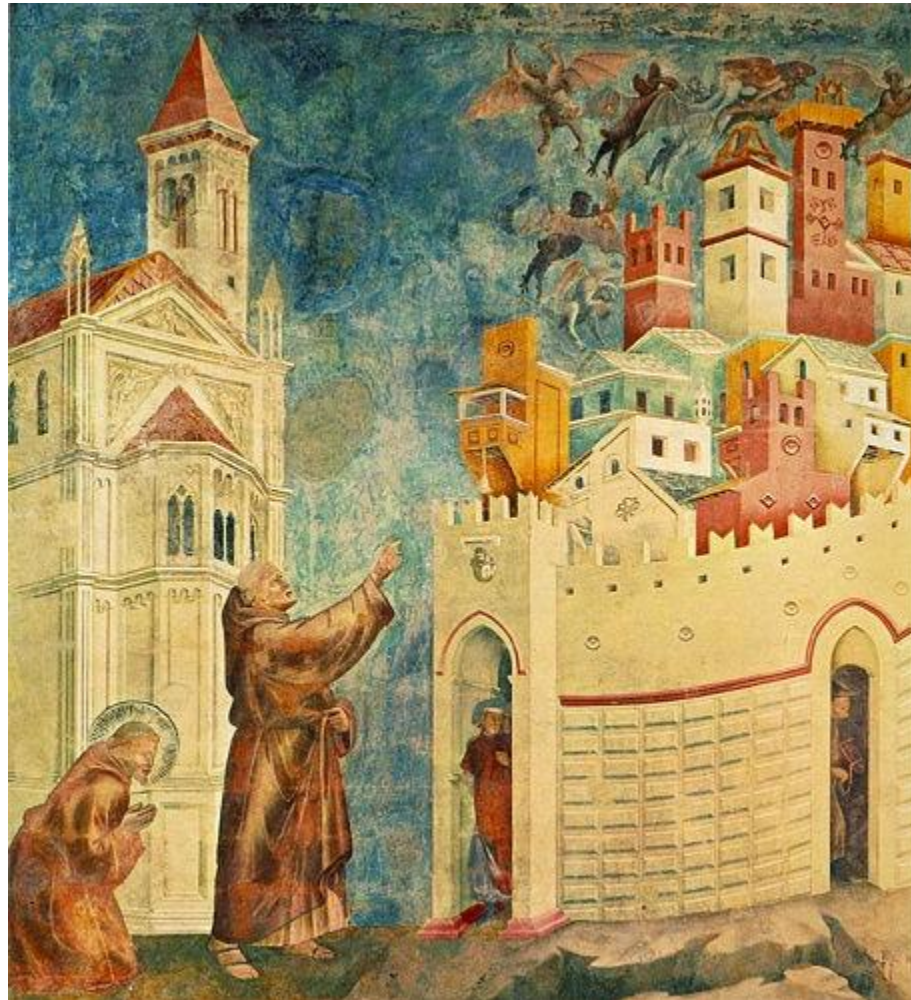
Very discernible even from afar is the rough stone blocks of Palazzo Vecchio, in contrast with the smooth textures in Galleria Uffizi

Besides to *renaître* (revive, rekindle) the intellectual wealth of ancient Greece and Roman Empire, which had vanished over the course of more than a thousand years of Middle Ages, Florentine artists and architects of the Renaissance also made more discoveries on various subjects in arts and architecture that were very kindly bequeathed to us.

The great dome of Santa Maria del Fiore constructed by Filippo Brunelleschi utilized a system of chains and double shells sheathed by special materials to ensure structural soundness of the dome that stands by itself without external support. Brunelleschi was obstinate

not to use a buttressing system to support the dome from the outside as found in Gothic architecture (a Medieval icon), but exerted to maintain a self-supporting structure like the Pantheon.

The theory on proportions between doors, windows, arches, and floor heights was studied and experimented on by great minds like Leon Battista Alberti, the architect of some very first Renaissance palaces such as Villa Rucellai. Alberti was also the one who discovered the methodology of graphical perspectives, including the theory of foreshortening and vanishing point. This explains why before this era, paintings depicting buildings were usually off in perspectives.



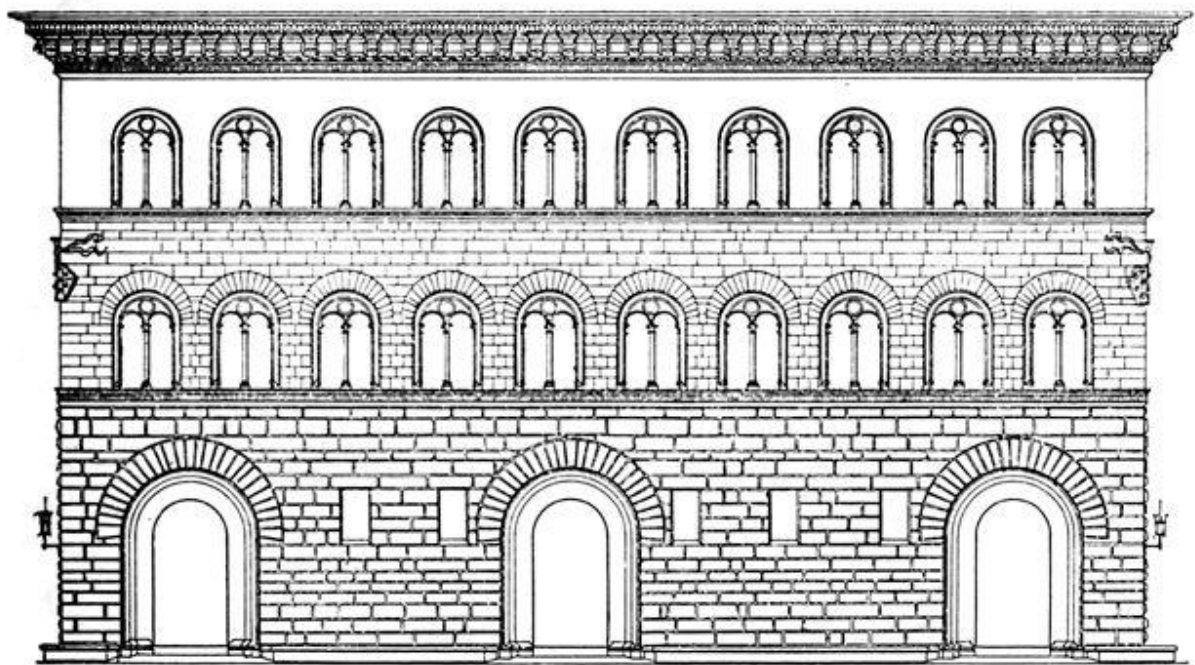
An example of Medieval art: The Legend of St. Francis by Giotto di Bondone and its early attempt at conveying perspective, albeit full of disproportions.

II. The story of piano nobile

As the name suggests, piano nobile means the "noble floor", or the floor that is most honored. Renaissance palaces and villas were often from 2 stories and no more than 3. In those 2 or 3 stories, "noble floor" happened to be the more adorned, more invested than the rest, which in turn would highlight the social status and affluence of the owner. Being the most grandeur floor, piano nobile would never appear at the ground level, where delicate details would not be able to survive the use and abuse from townspeople's activities. As the town grew,

the population rose, the more magnificent the noble floor, the coarser and tougher the ground floor ought to be to stand the test of vandalism.

Decorative motifs and details used for piano nobile were countless and varied from city to city, though to name a few, they would include vertical symmetry, a row of columns that divides the façade into bays, each bay with window(s), each window with an arch or triangle, with tracery as frames and mullions in those windows. The horizontal delineation of the building is conveyed by special moldings called cornice, which could be simple or intricate in accordance with the owner's wishes. Such delineation is also emphasized by the religiously even rows of windows, whose beauty is at its peak at piano nobile. In harbor cities like Venice and Monaco, those rows of windows open not into rooms but into arcades to welcome winds and fresh air as a means of natural ventilation. Thus, decorative details became even more elaborate in those cases.



The facade of Palazzo Ricardi which became the standard for Renaissance palaces. The building was residence to the Medici family, whose power and influence even spread to the Holy Church in Rome.

In the 2-story villas, piano nobile would have to be on the second floor. However, in those with 3 stories, piano nobile was still often situated on the second floor rather than the topmost floor. The 3rd floor, be it bare or embellished, would still never match the level of beauty of the true piano nobile, and will therefore be named "secondo piano nobile".

III. From Renaissance to Neoclassicism

The impact of Renaissance was undeniably extensive throughout Europe and sometimes was evident in a few maritime cities in the neighboring continent such as Alexandria or Cairo, and even in Italy's rival empire across the Mediterranean Sea: the Ottoman Empire. Elements such as composition and proportions in Renaissance, in time, became more and more

decorative, which subsequently transformed into Baroque and Rococo. Rococo took place during the French Revolution of 1789-1799. Its etymology suggests the origin of the name being the word "rocaille" in French, which means a layer of loose rock, or shell. This signifies the highly decorative nature of this movement.



Basilica Ottobeuren and its well-ornamented interior, to the point of being somewhat gaudy

Loyal to the principles of the Renaissance, many architects and scholars found it frustrating to witness the superficiality of Baroque and Rococo. These two movements, to these people, were getting out of hand in their decorative approach while departing far from the central idea of Renaissance which defined beauty in simplicity. These people came to realize that they needed to once again revive the fundamental and doctrinal standards of ancient Greece and ancient Roma. From this standpoint, there came Neoclassicism. Dare we say Neoclassicism is the Renaissance of Renaissance.

Age of Enlightenment, or *Siècle des Lumières*, both speak of the same period in mid-18th century. During the time, archaeological activities and historical surveys that presented never-before-seen findings shed new light to the European historians, giving them a more accurate look on the Greco-Roman traditions. Moreover, young generations from the middle class to elite families were encouraged to partake in an activity called 'Grand Tour' as they reached mature age. Traveling around the world helped open new horizons to those young minds and gave them opportunities to exchange ideas and texts that otherwise would never occur. This contributed tremendously in raising awareness in classical revival in arts and architecture.

The impact of Neoclassicism was immense. Architecture came closer to the Greco-Roman traditions. Art returned to the simplicity of composition and proportions, its palette being less and less ostentatious. Sculptures started to honor the curvature derived from the human body rather than ornate patterns and precious metals. Even in music, operas started to reduce the melodic lines that were beginning to sound trite and clichéd; the performances started to introduce the elements of Greek tragedy. The opera houses even removed showy decorations from the Rococo era.

IV. The story of corps de logis

Neoclassicism in architecture gave way to the birth of its branches such as the Second Empire style that emphasizes the political power as well as the opulence of the residents. The rise of the Second Empire under the reign of Napoléon III recreated Paris as the focal point of all Europe. During this period, Paris witnessed the redevelopment of the city under the supervision of Baron Haussmann, Prefect of Paris. Place de l'Étoile where 12 avenues converge at Arc de Triomphe was renovated into its current layout. In architecture, details such as paired columns/pilasters, wrought iron, and mansard roof helped convey the authoritarian approach of the palaces. After all, Second Empire architecture was a display of power.



Opera de Paris and the autocratic appearance portrayed in Second Empire

Besides taking the principles from Renaissance, French Neoclassicism also borrowed the sensibilities from Baroque such as the concept of "corps de logis" (literally: body of building). A building, especially a palace, is divided into three, with one main block and two wings, the main block of course being the more ornate and grandeur. The layout of the building would occur on an absolute axis of symmetry. This would make the authoritarian aesthetics of the Second Empire even more prominent. The whole building acts as a symbolic throne.

If the horizontal delineation and the concept of piano nobile were the defining elements of Renaissance, the vertical division and corps de logis were definitely the driving forces to determine the massing of a Second Empire palace.

Another “spin-off” of Neoclassicism in France was the Beaux Arts school with the founding of École des Beaux Arts which was considered the best school of architecture in the world during its prime years and still remains a prestigious school till this day. The school attracted not only students from Europe, but also those from North America and Asia during the Go-West movement at the turn of the 20th Century. It was school to some of the most prominent architects, among whom was Vietnamese architect Sir Ngô Viết Thụ. (Ngô Viết Thụ was the winner of 'Grand Prix de Rome' - the highest award bestowed by the Beaux Arts - in 1955. After his successful academic career in France, Ngô went on to create some of the most iconic buildings in his home country.)

V. Neoclassicism in Saigon

The time France officially colonized Vietnam coincided with the ripe moment of Neoclassicism. Very understandable is how "French Colonial architecture" is often a synonym for French Neoclassical architecture in SouthEast Asia. Many of the most luxurious and magnificent French buildings in Saigon derived from Neoclassical and Second Empire styles. Opera de Saigon, Palais Norodom (now Independence Palace), Saigon City Hall, etc. are some of the exhibits of Neoclassicism, which are never difficult to find in this city.



Hôtel de Ville Saigon - Saigon city hall



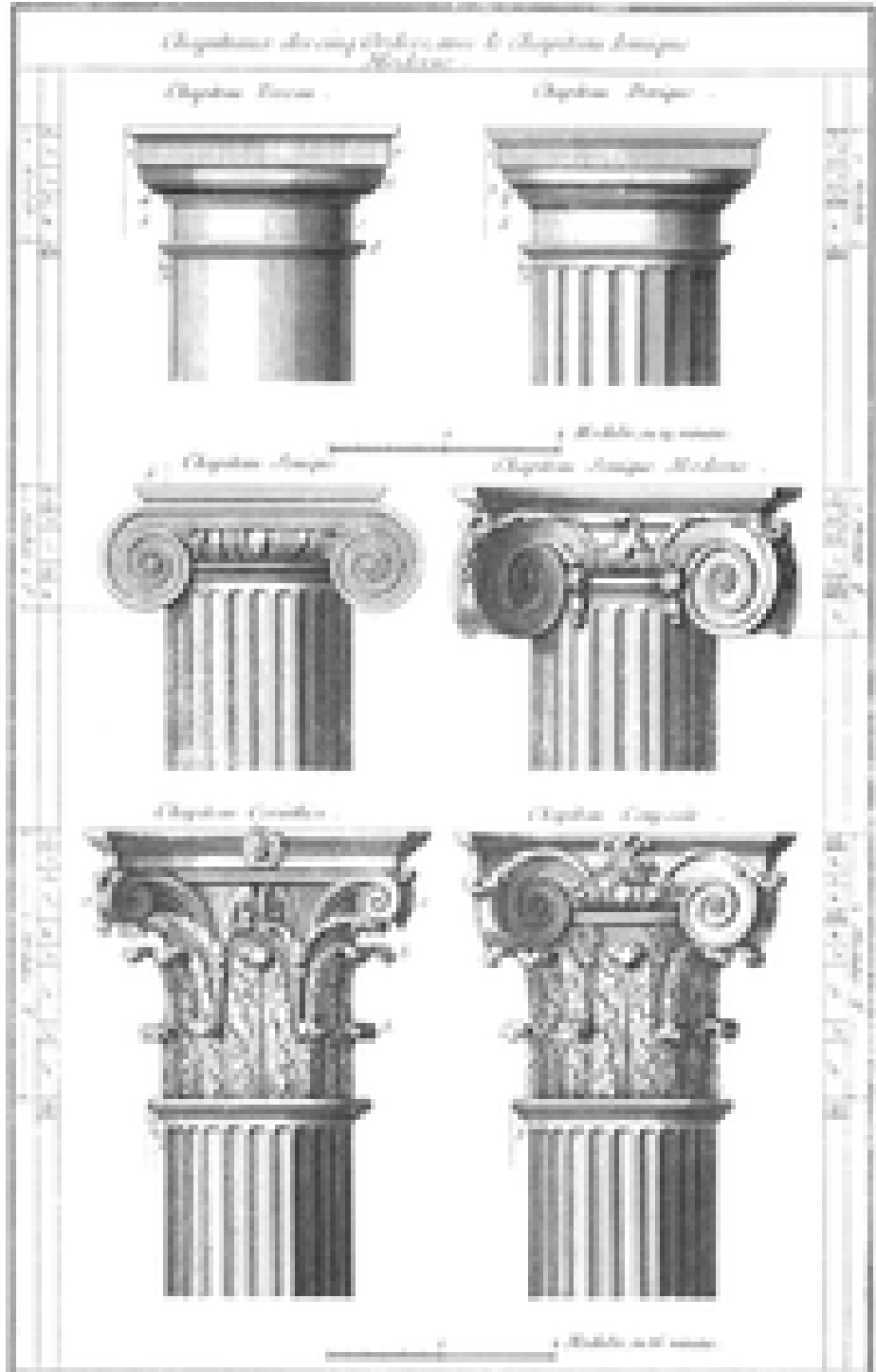
Hôtel de Ville Paris - Paris city hall

The parallels seem rather clear between the two city halls. Saigon as a new central hub in Indochina was a town where many French architects chose to build their career. One of the most successful architects was Alfred Foulhoux, the architect behind some of the most significant buildings in Vietnam such as Saigon Central Post Office, Palais de Gia Long (now HCMC museum), and the Customs House.

Both the Central Post and Gia Long Palace made good use of the corps de logis massing style with one central block and two wings on each side, promoting the zeitgeist of the epoch: Second Empire and the architecture of authority. In the Central Post, arches appear not only at the windows but also on the main portal. With wrought iron interior, the Central Post marked the peak of Neoclassical architecture before the modern movements took over, which would include Art Nouveau and its endemic whiplash curvature in metal that is also present here on the inside of this building. Horizontal delineation with cornice is still visible, though the effect of piano nobile seems to be less significant.

In Gia Long Palace, the cornices stepped down in favor of double-height columns which highlight the vertical division. These columns articulate the two stories of the building, making the viewers perceive the building to be taller than normal. The focus of the building lies in its central portal, with a pediment on top of an entablature, which are classical elements. We may also notice the Modern Ionic order in the columns. The original building had two human-shaped vertical supports at the central portal. These are called caryatids and can be found at the ancient Acropolis in Athens, Greece.

One man, one movement, two attitudes in two buildings.



Architecture.

Classical orders of columns. These are among the most important elements in architectural knowledge. The orders were passed on to us from ancient Greece, through the time of the Roman Empire, all the way through the Renaissance till now.



Gia Long Palace from the corner



Main entrance into Gia Long Palace

Besides the above-mentioned buildings, another remarkable gem in Foulhoux's oeuvre must be the Customs House, home to the directorate of customs during French occupation. The building actually had been constructed previously by a Chinaman known as the king of opium. A little about the original building of the king of opium: the façade was delineated into three clear stories, while the vertical division of one central block and two wings is not found. Along with

simplified decorative motifs, this is definitely a sign of homage to Renaissance architecture. We also see that three arcades are in the windows' stead. Arcade is a popular element in Venetian Renaissance, and can be seen in Doge's Palace or Procuratie (Nouve, new one). This is an example of a permeable façade in harbor cities that was popular for its natural shading and ventilation.

In his renovation of this building, Foulhoux added the double-height columns connecting the 2nd and 3rd floors, making the building appear more robust, in addition to eliminating the horizontal division between these two floors. The arches on the 2nd floor in the original building were taken off, suggesting that the 2nd floor doesn't terminate at its own ceiling, but rather continues to go up to the arches of the 3rd floor.



The majestic maison of the king of opium



Renovation and redevelopment by Alfred Foulhoux

The two upper stories then become one and turn into a piano nobile. This means the building now has a double-height piano nobile, making the building a coherent block with the most notable principles in Renaissance: roughness at the ground floor, refinement at the noble floor, elements that enhance the proportion of its façade, simplified decoration, basic composition. Dare we say this is Renaissance through a Neoclassical interpretation.

Sadly enough, the Customs House is up for demolition, among many other gems in this city. Another Neoclassical building that shares this Renaissance touch is number 59 Lý Tự Trọng (Gouverneur and Lagrandière respectively during French occupation, Gia Long avenue during Republic of Vietnam). This building was once the Bureaux du Secrétariat du Gouvernement (or Office of the Secretary of Indochina). Now it is the Department of Information and Communications.



59 Lý Tự Trọng. The design is a U shape with 3 blocks, using the rule of corps de logis of the Second Empire. However, each block showcases the conventions of Renaissance architecture.

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