

Peter Hassler

Modern Architecture

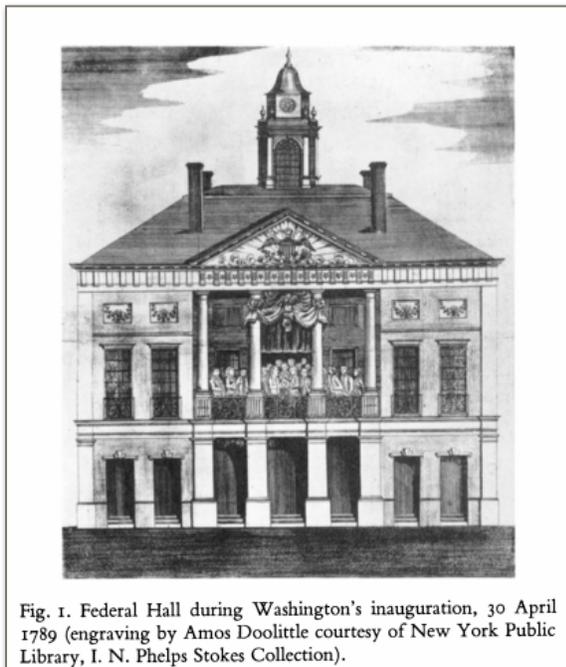
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How Federal Hall and the Pantheon Express Country and Empire

The U.S. Custom House (present day Federal Hall National Memorial) built in 1834-1842 (*Classicism* 10) in New York and the Pantheon built c. 118 AD - c.128 AD (Ward-Perkins 111) in Rome share architectural qualities beyond the easily identifiable like references to Greek order and the materials used. Their historic role and use of symbolism and meaning in their respective societies is what uniquely binds the two buildings. Each building played a role in helping to establish or reinforce the idea of country or empire. In one example, the Federal Hall, stood as a symbol of the democratic ideal in a burgeoning republic, while in the other example, the Pantheon was used by an emperor to prop himself up and unify an empire. Ancient Greece was a source for each building, yet in both cases a unique style emerged making them products of their time. An analysis of the history of their building sites, time periods as well as structure shows how each building helped to reinforce these ideas.

The current day Federal Hall was built on hallowed ground made so by the previous structure, perhaps imparting great meaning to any structure that would happen to be built there. After the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, the Continental Congress decided that New York would be the temporary capital. To accommodate the new seat of government Frenchman Major Pierre Charles L'enfant (1754-1825) was hired to



remodel the existing City Hall which came to be known as Federal Hall (Torres *Revisited* 327). Solidifying the importance of this site in U.S. history, Torres explains (327), "George Washington took the oath of office as the first President of the United States on the balcony on that memorable day in April 1789."

Ultimately, however, this Federal Hall was to meet its doom. After President Washington

signed a bill to move the capital to Washington D.C., the usefulness of Federal Hall was brought into question. In addition, the building's position jutting approximately 25 feet into Wall Street blocking Nassau Street to the north would most likely stoke the ire of Wall Street, fast becoming a major financial hub. The original Federal Hall was auctioned for \$425.00 and ultimately demolished in 1812 (Torres *Revisited* 338). As a nod

to the historical significance of the site, part of the balcony of President Washington's inauguration remains in the current day Federal Hall.

The U.S. Custom House that would come to occupy this site was designed by Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892) and Ithiel Town (1784-1844). Like, L'enfant's design for the old Federal Hall, Town and Davis's design for the U.S. Custom House would ultimately meet an inauspicious fate as well. Their plans were altered during construction by Samuel Thomson, who after resigning, saw his ownership of the project go to sculptor John Frazee (1790-1852) (Torres, *Frazee*, 143). Having been constructed on the location of the nation's first capitol building and inauguration site of the country's first president, Town and Davis's original design would have contained more meaning and symbolism than the existing structure shows, as well they would have taken these historical facts into consideration.

The Pantheon, like Federal Hall, was built on the site of previous structures. This fact not only gives them a commonality, but also deeply enmeshes these buildings into their respective country's history - perhaps more deeply than had they been built on virgin land. MacDonald backs up this assertion (12,13), "Where the Pantheon stands there had been an earlier, rectangular sanctuary of the same dedication, built by Augustus' (63 BC-14 AD) great minister Agrippa (63 BC-12 AD) and dedicated about 25 B.C. That building twice burned before Hadrian's (76-138 AD) accession, was entirely replaced by him with the present structure." The Pantheon, therefore, just like Federal Hall, was

built on a site already imbued with meaning. Perhaps this explains Hadrian's decision to restore Agrippa's original inscription to the Pantheon, acting as a remembrance of the past, much like the original balcony of Washington's inauguration that remains in today's Federal Hall. MacDonald writes (84), "By affixing Agrippa's inscription to his building, Hadrian celebrated its Augustan ancestry." The inclusion of Agrippa's inscription did lead to confusion as to when the Pantheon was originally built, however, date-stamped bricks confirm that the entirety was built during Hadrian's reign (MacDonald 13,14).

The Greek Revival (1820-1860) style in the United States was an appropriate style for public buildings like the Federal Hall during this time period in the United States. The style became a symbol of independence and contributes to the premise that Federal Hall expresses the idea of country. The style coincided with a period in the United States when Americans were seeking ever more independence, just after the end of the War of 1812 with Great Britain. Linking the new nation of the United States to the world's first democracy, Greek Revival became "an expression of democracy and national culture" in an optimistic and confident period (Harwood, Mae, Sherman 348). Hamlin writes, "There was withal a conscious separation from Europe and a fierce will to be American." Further, he quotes Emerson capturing the spirit of the time, "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." Finally, concluding, "the word 'Revival' is an unfortunate misnomer, for this style was

only a revival in that its decorative vocabulary was based upon classic Greek detail. In all other respects it was typically of America. Never before or since has there been less influence from Europe.”

With this backdrop, Alexander Jackson Davis designed the U.S. Custom House in 1833 in the Greek Revival style. By taking the Greek form and making it his own, Davis created a building rife with democratic and national meaning and a product of its time. Architecture even if influenced from another land can express local principles. The design of the Federal Hall was influenced by the Parthenon in Greece (Peck 42). There is a temple front with colonnades along the sides, a central dome and monumental

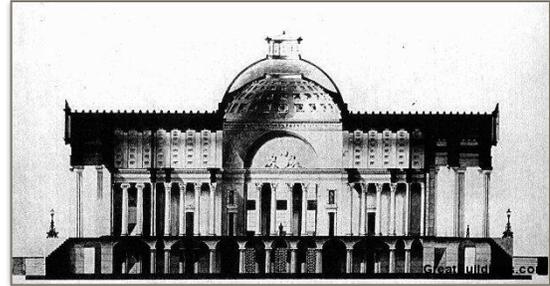


Custom House, New York City, 1833, Town and Davis, Watercolor and graphite on paper.

staircase. The staircase not only remedied a sloping ground but also helped to convey the power of the federal government (*American Classicism* 10). The building created a “simple composition that provided a dignified setting for the business of government in an era of ardent

democracy” (Peck 42). Furthermore, the strong horizontality of his design is imposing making it appropriate for a building representing the federal government. While the Pantheon is famous for its innovative dome, the lesser known dome of Federal Hall plays an equally important role in

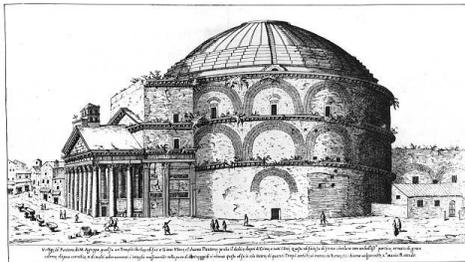
conveying national meaning and symbolism. Peck backs up this assertion (42) “domes had become closely associated in the American consciousness with the architecture of the democratic government.” Although the dome was covered with a gabled roof in a later reconfiguration of Davis’s design, Davis’s original intent was for the dome to be representative of American democracy (Hamlin 155). Davis also replaced the free-standing columns of the typical Greek peristyle



U.S. Custom House Section

with “powerful antae” (*American Classicism* 10). Federal Hall was designed as a uniquely American building expressing democracy without mimicking the past.

While Davis’s Federal Hall was an expression of American democracy and national



Pantheon: 16th Century Drawing by Etienne Du Pérac

culture, the Pantheon on the other hand, represented in part an emperor’s quest for power. The original Pantheon was struck by lightning and burned to the ground during emperor Trajan’s (53-117 AD) reign,

Hadrian’s adoptive father. When Trajan died he was

deified making Hadrian the son of god. When Hadrian

took over the Roman empire he, unlike his father, had thought the empire had

expanded enough and wanted to secure the empire as it existed within its current

borders essentially ending empire expansion. This decision displeased many Roman

senators and citizens. Some Romans also thought Hadrian's adoption was invalid and that he was not the rightful heir to the empire. Attempts were made on his life. At the start of his reign, Hadrian saw his popularity plummet. In an effort to bolster his popularity, Hadrian launched a massive building program. The result - a temple of all gods - would link Hadrian, a son of god, to the heavens (DuTemple 13-15). By becoming an expression of an emperor's power, the Pantheon also transformed from a place of worship into a place of governmental business, providing more common ground with Federal Hall.

Other expressions of empire can be found not only in the symbolism of the Pantheon's structure but also in the innovation of its design and engineering feat. The sheer magnitude of the engineering and architectural innovation of the Pantheon, could only serve to reinforce the power of the Roman empire. Ward-Perkins backs up this assertion (111),

The Pantheon seems the very embodiment of solid achievement; and although in this respect appearances do less than justice to the architect's originality in solving a number of formidable problems, both structural and aesthetic, for which there were no clear precedents, there is certainly not other single building which so fully, and by the very fact of its survival, so vividly sums up the achievement of the sixty years since Nero's Golden House was planned... Architectural thinking had been turned inside out.

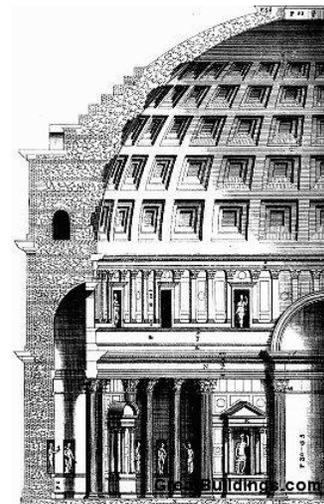
Furthermore, the impressiveness of the resulting rotunda would inspire awe in the Roman citizens of antiquity giving them faith and confidence in the empire.

"Familiarity cannot deaden the impact of the interior...Inside the building, one is

conscious not of the solid mass of the encircling masonry, but of the light and color of the seemingly effortless lift of the dome, soaring high above” (Ward-Perkins 114-115). In addition, as with Federal Hall, the Pantheon presented a mix of styles. Utilizing the Greek temple front, a colonnaded porch and ending in a dome, some critics argue that it is “clumsily contrived” (Ward-Perkins 112). Yet this helps to make the structure an unprecedented expression of the Roman empire.

Layers of symbolism of the Pantheon work together to express meaning beyond its purpose as a temple. The Pantheon’s dome, practically perfect in its geometry being equal in height and width (MacDonald 34) represents the concept of the heavens.

Furthermore, the oculus, 31 feet in diameter, in the dome’s ceiling provides an even more direct connection with the heavens (MacDonald 33). However, given Hadrian’s predilection to use the Pantheon for political purposes, the



Pantheon Section

dome also symbolizes the breadth of the Roman empire. Again, the perfect, seamless dome acts as a metaphor for the unity of the empire while simultaneously linking the empire to the gods. MacDonald supports this premise (89):

What seems more certain is that the dome was intended as a symbol of the heavens, the abode of the gods, ruled over by Zeus-Jupiter, the Sky God and Sky Father. His place, if not marked by an image in the rotunda, was the void seen through the oculus...All the gods, then: part of the cosmology expressed in architecture, sculpture, and light, placed in Rome by Hadrian, the Father of his People.

The intimate connection of the forces of the cosmos with the ruler and his subjects found frequent expression not only in official monuments, but also in humbler forms.

In the Pantheon the meaning of the architecture is multi-layered; empire, power and religion are inextricably united. This contrasts greatly with the purpose of Federal Hall which expresses American democracy and official government business.

In conclusion similarities abound for both buildings. Each had a Greek-derived temple front and a central dome of non-Greek order although the scale of the Pantheon's dome was unprecedented (Ward-Perkins 114). Each building was also used for government business yet with clear differences. The Pantheon officially a temple of all gods was, as previously mentioned, used by Hadrian to win favor of Roman senators and citizens. Furthermore, he used the symbolism of the structure to tie the Roman empire to the heavens and represent the unity of the empire. The design of the Federal Hall on the other hand used the symbol of the dome to denote a democratic government. The story of each building clearly shows how architecture and its meaning can represent ideas of country and empire and how both buildings, having survived not only various alterations over time, but also war, symbolize the longevity and stability of the United States and the Roman empire perhaps even binding the two to each other in an historical context.

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