



A selection of important architectural terms

Some of the most important and relevant architectural terms have been listed below. This is not an exhaustive list and should not be used as such.

How to use this digital glossary:

1. Read the accompanying text given for each term.
2. Click on the architectural term below to get a full detailed description of the architectural feature.
3. When using the website for images, click on the thumbnail image to view in high-resolution.

Architectural term and website link	Description
aditus	A generic word for any opening to some interior space or cavity. In Roman theatre construction, Vitruvius uses the word to describe audience entrances to the <i>cavea</i> .
aditus maximus	Roman entrance to the orchestra , typically located between the cavea and the scaena , one on either side of the orchestra; corresponds to the parodos in the Greek theatre.
apse	A semicircular recess, often at the end of a room, and with a half-dome as its roof. Below is an apse from the Pantheon in Rome.
amphitheatre	From <i>amphi</i> , meaning “on both sides” or “around” and <i>theatron</i> , meaning “place for viewing.” An oval or circular, open-air performance space with tiered seating on all sides.
aqueduct	Aqueducts were massive structures comprised of many arches, which were used to transport water. Below is the Pont du Gard in France.
architectural orders	An architectural classification system based on the shape and proportion of classical design elements found in Greek and Roman structures.
architrave	The bottom element of the entablature in classical architecture. The chief beam. It is the horizontal lintel (beam) that rests upon the column capitals (tops). It is the horizontal entablature element beneath the frieze .
basilica	A large, tower-like structure, one at either side of a Roman stage. Usually roofed, these tall, rectangular structures served as a theatre foyer and contained openings (<i>versurae</i>) for access to the stage (<i>pulpitum</i>).
baths/thermae	Roman baths were important social areas. Business deals, exercise and general hygiene were all important aspects of the baths. Women could be allowed in early in the morning but were not allowed to be in the bath complex later on, as men and women bathed separately.
buttress	A mass placed to support a wall, especially when the wall bears an arch or heavy weight. Flying buttresses support a weight over space and allow for walls to be weakened by the inclusion of niches and windows.
capital	The crown which joins the top of a column with the abacus and aids in distributing weight. Different types include the simple convex Doric and the highly decorative Corinthian with stylised acanthus leaves.
cavea	The tiered, semicircular seating space in a Roman theatre. A large theatre had three seating tiers: the <i>ima cavea</i> was the lowest part of the <i>cavea</i> ; the <i>media cavea</i> was the middle, and the <i>summa cavea</i> was the upper tier.



cella	The main room in the middle of a temple, usually containing the cult statue of a god or goddess.
circus	Chariot races were held at the circus. The largest was the Circus Maximus, in Rome, which could hold approx. 200,000 people.
colonnade	A row of columns, often free-standing, separated from each other by an equal distance. The row may be curved or straight and may support a covered roof or enclose an open space.
column	These are supports for buildings. They are usually divided into, Doric, Ionic or Corinthian. Below are examples of different orders of columns and the columns from the portico of the Pantheon.
concrete	Concrete is a compound material made by mixing cement (lime, sand and water) with an aggregate: usually gravel or shingle. It was originally discovered by the Egyptians, but they failed to realise its potential. In the 1st century BC however, the Romans became masters in the uses of concrete
Corinthian order	Resembles <i>ionic</i> in most aspects except for the column capital; <i>Corinthian</i> columns have tall capitals shaped like upside-down bells and are covered with rows of acanthus leaves and small vine-like spirals called helixes. The <i>Corinthian order</i> was originally used for columns inside buildings and did not appear externally until the 4th century BC; use in exterior temple colonnades did not become widespread until Roman times.
cornice	The horizontal band that crowns the top of an architectural feature such as a colonnade, wall, or doorway. It typically projects out and over the <i>frieze</i> . It is composed of three parts: the bed, corona, and cymatium.
cuneus	The wedge-shaped seating section in the Roman theatre; corresponds to Greek <i>kerkis</i> .
doric order	Architectural style presumably developed on the Greek mainland and in southern Italy and Sicily. Although the Doric order is traditionally credited with slightly pre-dating the <i>ionic order</i> , both orders were established by the end of the seventh century. Doric columns are slightly tapered, simple, and sturdy and have no base. Shallow, parallel groves (flutes) run from the bottom to the top of the shaft.
drum	The individual circular pieces used to construct some types of columns.
engaged column	Columns which are incorporated within a wall.
entablature	That horizontal, architectural portion of a classical building or portico that sits atop columns or a wall, but beneath the roof or pediment. The entablature has three major elements: the architrave (the bottom element equivalent to the lintel in post and lintel construction), the frieze (the middle, horizontal strip that may be ornamented, and the cornice (the top horizontal strip of decorative mouldings that overhang the parts below).
forum	The forum was the beating heart of a city. It would contain many important buildings and structures such as temples, basilica, the rostra, markets, etc. & was the social hub of a Roman city.
frieze	The middle element of the entablature in Classical architecture. The wide, central band of the entablature above the architrave and below the cornice. The frieze is often decorated: Doric order may use alternating triglyphs (projecting rectangular blocks with vertical lines) and metopes (spaces between the triglyphs). In Ionic and Corinthian orders, the frieze may be plain or ornamented with relief figures or decorations.
hypocaust	A heating system usually used in the baths to heat different pools.



ima cavea	Most desirable seating in Roman theatres; reserved for the upper echelons of society (senators and equestrians).
Ionic order	Architectural style presumably developed in Ionia and on some of the Greek islands by the 6th century BC. More ornamental and graceful than Doric. Considered by ancient Greeks to be feminine as opposed to the more masculine Doric style. The Ionic column rests on an elaborate curving base; column shaft more slender than Doric style, significant detail is found in the capital: two spiral volutes (design element resembling partially unrolled scrolls; Ionic capital is directional).
media cavea:	Roman middle tier of cavea seating. The media cavea was reserved seating for plebs togatae (respectable citizens).
metope	A square space in the frieze between two triglyphs, often filled with relief sculpture or ornaments such as shields.
monolithic column	A column carved from a single piece of stone.
odeum	A small, roofed theater or recital hall used for entertainment such as performed music, poetry readings, debates, or lectures.
orchēstra	The orchēstra was the primary performance space for the chorus in Greek theatre; also adapted for use as an arena for Roman “spectacle entertainment.” The orchēstra was the space between the audience and the Greek skēnē or Roman scaena, circular in Classical Greek theatre; horseshoe-shaped in Hellenistic theatre; semicircular in Roman theatres.
parodos	The large arched gateways, either side of the skēnē, through which an audience entered a theatre.
pediment	The triangular bit at the top of a temple. On Greek and Roman temples there would often be a frieze, or statues, on the pediment.
peristyle	A colonnade surrounding a building
porta	A Roman gate or doorway.
porticus	Long covered ambulatory with a roof carried on colonnades, sometimes attached to a building, and sometimes a separate structure. An open structure with a roof supported by columns. In a Roman theatre the covered colonnade at the rear of cavea or behind scene house.
portus post scaenas	A portico or passageway behind the scaenae (scene house) of a Roman theatre.
pulpitum	Roman theatre stage (<i>logeion</i> in the Greek theatre). A platform for a public speaker in front of the scaenae frons .
scaenae	From the Ancient Greek, skēnē . In the Roman theatre usually referring to the stage house or building behind the pulpitum (stage); corresponds to the Hellenistic skēnē . Often used in the pl. (scaenae) because it was composed of multiple parts.
scaenae frons	Elaborately decorated permanent architectural front wall of the Roman scaenae (stage house). The wall could range in height from one to three stories and was typically ornamented with one to three tiers of columns (columnatio), balconies, and statues. The wall normally contained three entrances to the stage – a richly decorated center door, valva regia or “royal door,” flanked by two smaller doors: the porta hospitalis or “guest doors.” The sides of the stage were enclosed by the basilica walls, each having a door which lead off-stage. In some theatres a permanent roof extended from the scaenae frons and covered the stage.



summa cavea	Used by less distinguished or common audience members such as urban poor, foreigners, slaves, and women).
theatrum	Corresponds to the Greek theatron. The audience sat in the theatron to watch a performance of a Greek play: alternate name, koilon , a hollow or cavity. The theatron originally referred to the audience space of the Greek theatre but later became synonymous with the entire structure consisting of the spaces for both the audience as well as the performance; Roman spelling: theatrum . Also see: Roman cavea .
travertine	Limestone quarried at Tivoli. It is hard stone and capable of carrying a lot of weight and can be used for decorative purposes.
triglyph	A decorative element of a frieze with two vertical grooves. Often used in alteration with metopes.
triumphal arches	Romans celebrated great military victories by erecting arches to commemorate them.
tufa	a soft stone, local to several quarries near Rome. It is solid volcanic mud and does not bear very heavy loads.
vault	A vault is a structural member consisting of an arrangement of arches, usually forming a ceiling or roof.
velarium	An awning in a Roman theatre or amphitheatre that stretched above the audience as protection from the sun and elements). Also referred to as velum .
versurae	Entrances on either side of a Roman stage. Commonly used to denote the large foyers (basilicas) that flank the stage, but strictly speaking, versurae refer to the entrances themselves.
volute	The scrolls of an Ionic capital.
vomitoria	Entrance/exit passageways. Literally, a means of “spitting out” or expelling theatre attendees. The vaulted passageways leading to or from the theatre seating. The vomitoria connected to the lateral cryptae under the cavea forming an efficient network of exits and entrances for the audience.

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