



“Column” Harris, Cyril. Historic Architecture Sourcebook

The Column:

Have you ever wondered why lots of modern houses with column fronts or porticoes look strange? Over the years, columns have been made in all shapes and sizes and some builders have strayed significantly from the original proportions first developed by the Greeks.

In the history of architecture it’s not an exaggeration to say that the basic building block throughout time has been the column. In its most simple form, a column is a post, either round or square in section. Typically a pair of columns supports a horizontal beam which creates a basic structural component that can support either walls or a roof. As classical architecture was developed by the ancient Greeks, the basic building block of the column was refined into the standard shapes and sizes that we still use today in many buildings.

A classical column is always divided into three parts: the base, the column and the capital. Over centuries the Greeks developed three different styles of columns: the Doric is most simple and was associated with masculinity and used in temples dedicated to masculine Gods. Ionic columns are identified by the two scroll type features that occur at the top of the capital. Ionic columns were associated with feminine characteristics, they are noticeably more slender than Doric columns, and were used in temples dedicated to female goddesses. Corinthian columns have a simplified Ionic flute combined with several leaf type shapes.

Each of the three column styles had horizontal elements (the decedents of the original beams) that are called entablatures. In addition each column had individual proportioning systems associated with its style, usually based upon the diameter of the column. The height of most classical columns is some direct multiple of the column’s diameter. Awkward looking columns always exceed the original ratios, sometimes by a wide margin, causing them to look spindly. To achieve correctly proportioned columns, you should consult one of the historical texts for the correct width to height ratio and stick with the original proportions.

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