Roman Colloseums Essay, Research Paper

Roman Coliseums By: Tim Kolton Architecture of the ancient Roman Empire is considered one of the most impressive of all time. The city of Rome once was home to more than one million residents in the early centuries AD1. The Romans had a fine selection of building monuments in the city of Rome including the forums for civic services, temples of worship, and amphitheaters for recreation and play. The Romans made great use and pioneered great architecture mechanisms including arches, columns, and even mechanical elements in pulleys and early elevators. However, when one tends to think of great buildings, one building stands out in Rome. This building is the Flavian Amphitheatre, or better known as the Colosseum. When discussing such a great monument such as the Colosseum, it is very important to realize the time, place, and culture in wish it stood to fully understand both its form and function. In the beginnings, Rome was both influenced by the Etruscans of the North and Greeks of Italy and South but had its basic roots from a long time of Samnite domination2. The Etruscans were that of an interesting type as described by Peter Quennell: The Etruscans…combined a passionate devotion to the ordinary pleasures of life with a haunting fear of death. They were cruel, too, and deeply superstitious…their victims were ordered to fight among themselves until the last had fallen. The Etruscans would have a strong impression in Roman lifestyles and philosophies. For example, the purple robe worn by leaders would be later adopted by the Romans. They also were the influence which brought gladiatorial battles of sacrifice into the Roman culture. This was a time of blood thirsty humans who loved the site of battle. Even an early christian named Alypius proclaimed that he “took away with him a mad passion which prodded him not only to return (to gladatior events) with those by whom he had first been forced in, but even ahead of them and dragging in others.”3 This was a time of paganism, which meant sacrifice and death. Early christians were persecuted for their beliefs in the first few centuries. Clearly in Rome, the focus was not only on religion or the emporer, but we have a focus on leisure and activities. It is said that of a three-hundred and sixty-five day year that one-hundred and fifty days were celebrated as regular holidays, with over ninety days given up to games4. This type of lifestyle would dominate the cities and architecture of the Romans for some time to come. The people of Rome enjoyed theatres, battles, races, baths, comical events, and of course the game of death. There were many forums, temples, and many amphitheaters in the history of Rome, however only a few stand out even today. The Colosseum is the greatest standing building of Rome, and one of the most recognized worldwide architectural achievements to this day. The amphitheater is a type of architecture that was without Greek precedents. This makes sense since its primary purpose was to hold gladitiator fights and brutal shows which were banned in Athens at the time. Such events held in Roman amphitheaters were horseracing, gymnastics, mock cavalry battles, footraces, prizefighting, wrestling, fights between animals, between men, animals and men, and even naumachiae, or mock sea battles5. One of the first amphitheaters was the Pompeian amphitheater of Pompeii of 30 BC. Like the Colosseum, it was oval in plan. It was supported on great masses of solid earth pierced by a broad corridor at each end. Stone seats were added at one time but most spectators sat on the earth or wooden chairs. Although this amphitheater was a great innovation, it would be eclipsed by the Flavian Amphitheater, better known as the Colosseum. The great building although fitting and plain in design to its surroundings of Rome still stood out due to its sheer monstrosity and oval shape. Although the site viewed today is still a marvel, back in the days of its prime it was a spectacular site that would be difficult to apprehend with only words[TVK1]. [TVK2] The city which held the great structure was full of great examples of the use of arches, columns from every order, and of course sheer size. When traveling the city to the Colosseum the whole area had been paved and railed off. The approach was taken by cobbled slabs of lava, and then one entered an area paved with travertine more than five thousand feet wide and surrounded by huge boundary stones6. To a spectator at the time the Colosseum from the outside is described by the romantic poet Johann Wolggang von Goethe: When one looks at it all else seems little; the edifice is so vast, that one cannot hold the image of it in one’s soul- in memory we think it smaller, and then return to it again to find it every time greater than before. As one looked at it from the city, there were many sights to behold, but the Colosseum stood out 19 centuries ago, and still does to this date. At the end of the Emperor Nero and the triumph of the Flavians every effort was made to forget the times of the Julio-Claudians (of which Julius Caesar’s family) and move to newer times. The focus of arhictecture and buildings shifted from the emperor’s creations to the public’s buildings. The next prominent emperor was Vespasian. His first contribution to the public was an enormous forum with a temple of Peace in it.7 His greatest feat was the beginning of the construction of the Colosseum for “games” purposes around 72 AD. Titus succeeded the ever-joking Vespasian and completed his fathers dream around 79-80 AD. The dedication of the Colesseum was a lavish gladiator show that lasted for exactly one-hundred days in which over nine thousand animals were killed.8 A typical day at the Colesseum show usually started with a bloodless comic relief battle, often times with dwarfs, women, or cripples battling with wooden objects. A tuba would sound and the main events would begin. The gladiator fights were the most popular and prominent fights. These featured two highly trained men battling for courage, strength, and dignity. They would often rather take a blow and stand strong than wimper and run in defense. The people were in love with gladiators much like today’s sport heroes. It is written that famous women would even leave their husbands for famous gladiators which were known to be very scarred and ugly by Roman standards.9 The gladiator fight was a ruthless blood-ridden spectacle which usually ended in death by the loser who begged for mercy and was chosen to die by the present emperor or crowd cheers of 45,000 hysterical fans. Even more appalling than the gladiator fights may have been the famous wild beast hunts. Some beast slayers fought lions, tigers, bears, and bulls which brought many animals to near extinction in the surrounding areas. However, even worse than the wild beast hunts was the killings of rather harmless animals such as ostriches, giraffes, deer, elephants, and even hippopotami all for the delight of the crowd. The Colosseum utilized machinery to even raise animals to the battle floor from beneath where the catacombs and passages lay. The Colosseum would be decorated with trees, hillocks, and other elements to simulate natural surroundings.10 One such fighter was the deranged emperor Commodus who had such a passion for unequal combat he visited the Colesseum more than a thousand times slaughtering at one time one hundred bears, killed ostriches, and even innocent fans if they laughed. It was clear to many that he was insane, and he was assinated by a famous athlete. Perhaps the most interesting of all events held was the mock sea battles. The Romans were famous for running water in their architecture, and this allowed them to flood the battle field and hold mock sea battles. Of course with all of this bloodshed, it was very controversal starting in the third to fourth centuries. The paganism of Rome had rooted from the Etruscans and was evident at the Colosseum. Christianity was also spreading around, but most Roman emperors would not accept Christians. As Peter Quennell puts it in his writings: The Christians, like the Jews with whom they were sometimes confused, were reported to worship an ass-headed god and were also said to practice incest, cannabalism, and other equally atrocious crimes. The Christians were inflamed, said their pagan adversaries, by an odium generis humani, a downright loathing of the human race, and as public enemies they at once received the blame for any calamity that might befall the empire. As one can tell from the above descriptions, many Christians were persecuted by the Roman emperors. If one did not choose to pledge their loyalty to the emperor by a sacrificial ceremony and to deny their own religion, they were executed. Some executions were in the Colosseum where the Christians were defenseless and killed by wild lions. Others were burned alive at the stake, shot with arrows, or stoned. The major changes of attitude towards Christians came with the Constantine the Great. He last exchanged the purple pagan robes for the white robes of Christian faith. However paganism continued until 392, when Theodosius I and Valentinian II prohibited any form of pagan sacrifice. However it was Honorius who abolished the games of the Colosseum, but criminals were still persecuted there for more than one-hundred years. 11 After that it was generally used up until the end of the sixth century for concerts, sermons, and bullfights. The structure itself of the Colloseum can be summarized as the symbol of Rome and it’s respect across the world: mammouth. The overall plan is a huge elliptical structure measuring about 617 by 512 feet: the measure of the actual arena are 280 by 180.12 Estimates of capacity range from 45,000 to 50,000 spectators. It is believed to be made of two half circles in order for the accoustics to be amplified. The building incorporates many Roman influences with some Greek past, and some of its own technologies that are some of the most wonderous creations of man. The most important of aspects of this monument are in its arches, columns, vaulting, technological advances, and in its mere magnitude. The arches and barrel-vaulting are typical of Roman buildings and architecture, but should be given more thought. The Colosseum is built as four stories which was unprecedented in its day. The arch was a great Roman architecture innovation which allowed for great amounts of weight to be carried over long spans. The arches allowed for the great load bearing required to support a monument such as the Colosseum. Arches are built by a series of stones or bricks placed side by side in such a manner that they can support one another and weight while bridging a wide space. A barrel-vault is a half cylinder created from the continuation of the arches. The outermost walls of the structure sat on eighty piers connected by stone barrel-vaults. The four stories symbolized the basic Roman orders: Tuscan (variation of Doric), Ionic, Corinthian, and tall Corinthian pilasters on the fourth story. The outer walls on the bottom were faced in Doric columns faced with travertine with an Ionic entablature which ran all around the building. Inside the building the columns on the bottom were Doric and contained two parallel corridors barrel-vaulted in concrete which surrounded the building. The second level and third level were similar to the first, except the outer walls were separated by lined up columns of the Ionic order, and the third level outer wall was Corinthian. The fourth level is different than the first three and this had much to do with the covering of the Colosseum which will be discussed later. It consisted of a flatter surface with Corinthian pilistars and in alternating sections contained windows. The roof of the upper corridor seems to have formed a flat wooden platform below the top of the outer wall. The sailors who operated the roof used this platform. The seating was sat at a 37 degree angle13, and had a stairway system to enter the three levels as shown by the cutouts of the four levels below. The building was not made all of travistine, but was made of lighter and porous pumice stone and also of brick and concrete. The seating on the bottom was covered in marble and brass, and higher levels were made of wood. Some of the technology employed at the time of this building is very similar to today’s buildings of similar uses for games. For instance there were 76 entrance gates of the 80 piers. The latter four were used for emperors and gladiators (one of which was used to drag the bodies to an unmarked grave). The entrance gates were numbered and corresponded to numbers stamped on the fan’s tickets much like todays sporting events. With 80 gates one could easily maneuver to their correct gate. In the ground floor contained an intricate labyrinth of cells which housed the gladiators, animals, and workers. There were splendid uses of machinery in which to lift the gladiator or animal to the surface of the battle arena. But the most amazing construction at the Colosseum had nothing to do with the show. It was designed purely for the benefit of the audience, to keep them calm and content as the violent spectacle unfolded below. It was a roof. The roof of the Colleseum was one that was retractable and much like a sailor. So much in fact, sailors who lived in a nearby town managed the velarium, or colored awning. This was a remarkable feat considering that most stadiums now days are still not fully enclosed (such as the Cowboy’s stadium). The use of the corbels on the uppermost deck and the use of a pulley system brought about this feat of ingenious. Some archeologists thought that the roof was non-existent or was a web of ropes, but it is now believed to be made from masts and pulleys. The masts would hold horizontal masts on which to pull the awning over. It is believed that it did not cover the whole structure, but at least the most important seatings of the emperor for the whole day.14 Hebrew prisoners and slaves of the time employed the building of the Colesseum. All the details of the actual construction are unknown, but it is based upon a barrel-vaulted scheme that circles around. The builders used tavertine blocks to construct a framework of piers, arches, and linked walls and vaults. The cement posts go deep into the ground to support the great weight. The lower level vaults were constructed of tufa or pumice. On the upper floors the walls were built with brick and concrete (utilizing volcanic sand to dry). Travertine was used to surround the outside and was held in place by iron clamps. 15 The experience of being outside the Colosseum was plain except for the added statues. The outside of the building was paved with boundaries and roads. One could make out the hundreds of semicircles and arches. The arches increased upwards from Truscan, Doric, and Corinthian columns to the Corinthian Pillars and wall of the fourth deck. The outside was a brilliant travertine that must have been a spectacular sight. Next to the building one would feel he is nothing but a little gnat compared to the great building. To get inside one must enter their gate, and proceed up the stairway to the designated level much like a modern stadium. Since there were 80 entrances, many people could occupy the great Amphitheater. Inside the Coloseum the arena floor was wooden and covered with sand to soak the blood. There was a great podium made of marble on the sidelines housed the dignitaries. Above that were marble seats for distinguished private citizens. The second held the middle class, the third held slaves and foreigners, and the fourth levels were for women and the poor who sat on wooden seats.16 The great velarium was multicolored and must have been a specticle on the inside of the Colosseum when raised. This would also shadow and protect the fans from nature. The arches allowed for great ventilation, stability, and passageways to keep the crowd comfortable all day. On a whole the Colosseum is symbolized by its size which represents the greatness of Rome. The name may be attributed to its size, or some believe to the colossal statue of Nero nicknamed the “crowned colossus” that was nearby. With all of the circular motifs used by the arches, and of the building itself, some believe it symbolizes the sun. This also makes sense considering part of the Colosseum was built from the Golden House of Nero, also known as the solar statue, or sun statue. Many symbols used in the Colosseum were of Pagan descendent. This included the sacrifices, purple robes, battle-axes, and hammers of the Etruscan Pagans. The cross was erected to commemorate the early Christians who are believed to have died here (although there is no evidence to support this belief). The great arch beside the Coliseum was erected in the third century in honor of Constantine, although much of its decoration was pilfered from monuments to other emperors. Since one of the symbols was of the sun, the arches created natural and splendid light and shadows as shown in the picture. Much poetry has been written of the light, shadows, and even smoke from the arches of the Colosseum. When it was not noon the light would create long shadows and yet have bright instances which accentuate the arches and columns in the bright light. It shows an alternating natural pattern of shadows. One of the first natural changes of the Colosseum came in 320 when lightning struck and damaged the building. In 422 it was damaged by an earthquake. However Theodosius II and Valentitian III repaired it only to be again damaged by an earthquake in 508. After the sixth century the city of Rome and the Coleseum went downhill because of some devastating disasters. Towards the end of the sixth century grass was starting to grow rampant at the Colosseum, . 1 The colleseum, pg 52 2 history arch p 191 3 the colle p 60 4 the colleseum pf 52 5 history theatre p 61 6 colo pg 41 7 rome p 64 8 history theatre p61 9000! 9 P 48, colesseum 10 drama 11 cole p72 12 arc rom greece 13 hist arch p 208 14 nova 15 the colop 40 16 col the, p 39 [TVK1] [TVK2]PICTURE!!!