

The roman colosseum essay sample

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It took about ten years to build the enormous structure famously known as the Roman Colosseum. Originally called the Amphitheatrum Flavium, after nearly two centuries this building still remains as one of the oldest, most perfect, and most important examples of architecture and engineering (Michikute, 2004).

History

The Colosseum was built by the Flavian emperors in the first century AD as a gift to the Roman Citizens. Numerous uprisings and disasters in Rome had caused Vespasian to lose his fame as an emperor. In order to regain the Roman favor back, he decided to build the Colosseum as a present to the people. It was built in the land previously taken from the people of Rome, the land where Emperor Nero built his grand residence, the Domus Aurea. Upon the death of Nero, marking the ending of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Emperor Vespasian (picture below) was acknowledged as emperor by the Senate in 69 AD.

Emperor Vespasian started the construction of the building in 72 AD. The artificial lake in the park of Nero's residence was filled in and the construction of the building started. The Domus Aurea was torn down and gladiatorial schools and other buildings were constructed in this ground. The treasure said to be used for the construction of this building is from the booty that the Romans got from their victory in the Great Jewish Revolt in 70 AD (Wikipedia).

By the time of death of Vespasian in 79 AD, the Colosseum was completed up to the third story. It was completed and inaugurated by Titus, his son, in

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80 AD. Under Vespasian's younger son, Emperor Domitian, the building was remodeled with the addition of the hypogeum, or the series of underground tunnels used to house animals and slaves. He also added a gallery at the upper level to increase seating capacity (Wikipedia).

The Colosseum is especially popular for the games held in the amphitheatre. Most famous were the *venationes* or hunts and the *munera* or the gladiatorial games. According to Andrea Pepe (2001), the Roman ruling class was obliged to organize games to gain the favor of the citizens. This is written in the law and expected by the people. Great expenses are needed, however in organizing games. During the reign of Emperor Domninitian, he also added four *ludi* or the prisons where gladiators had their training (Pepe, 2001).

The Colosseum is not freed from the ravages of natural calamities. Evidence of changes and repairs can be seen in building. In 217, the upper floors were eaten by fire because of a thunderbolt. It was also hit by earthquakes in the years 442, 470 and 847. According to Pepe (2001) the last gladiatorial combat recorded is in 404, and the last hunt is in 523. The last hunt staged in the Colosseum was in 523 AD, when the king Theodoric gave permission to Anicius Maximus to celebrate his consulate.

It was during his reign that the area was reclaimed and used to connect the Celian hill to the Colosseum with a road was built level with the arena (Pepe, 2001). It was also Theodoric who defined games as “actus detestabilis, certamen infelix” and blamed Titus for having spent all that money in a building destined to celebrate death (Pepe, 2001). As time passes, the public

had changed as nobody also can bear anymore the huge expenses needed in organizing shows.

By the Middle Ages, radical changes on the use of the Colosseum. By the 6th century houses and churches are said to be constructed within the walls of the amphitheatre. Evidence also shows that parts of it were used as cemetery. Pepe (2001) described “ 89 burial places, dating back from Diocletian to Theodoric’s times (IV-VI century) have been found in the valley of the Colosseum, mainly in the NE sector 63 burial places have been found in and around the amphitheatre, though only 56 have been mapped”.

By the 12th century the Frangipani family took over the Colosseum and fortified it. A great earthquake in 1349 severely damaged it and its destruction is further hastened as it became a source of building materials for reconstruction of churches, houses and other buildings in Rome.

A religious order called the Confraternita del Santissimo Salvatore ad sancta Sanctorum, also called del Gonfalone, inhabited part of the building by the middle of the 14th century until the 19th century. In 1490 it was granted permission to hold Passion plays in the amphitheatre. But it was only until the 16th and 17th centuries that the Colosseum had something to do with the Christian faith. It was Pope Pius V who recommended that pilgrims gather sand from the arena of the Colosseum to serve as relic of the blood of martyrs. (Pepe, 2001)

When Pope Gregorius Magnus introduced the practice of recycling ancient temples and turning them into Christian churches, it hastened the

deterioration of the Colosseum as rocks and lime were extracted from the inside walls of the building. By the end of the 14th century, at the peak of the imperial expansion of Rome and transfer of Papal seat to Avignon, the city where the Colosseum was located has lost its importance and population. Repeated invasions and looting of Italy had taken its toll and reduced to only about a million inhabitants in the city. (Pepe, 2001)

Decades of decay and neglect left the Colosseum overgrown with plants and the ground floor submerged by earth and debris. It was only until 1720 when modern architectural study began with the survey by Carlo Fontana of the amphitheatre (Pepe, 2001). It became a part of an archaeological park. Excavation started in 1805 which was carried out by architects Comprorese, Palazzi and Stern. Niches around the podium and entrance called the Passage of Commodus and part of the drain around the amphitheatre was excavated (Pepe, 2001).

In 1809 to 1870 were the period when excavation work was done in the Colosseum. By 1974, this time Rome was the Capital of the new Italian state, half of the arena was liberated from debris and excavation reached the bottom. It found a type of paving made from brick known as opus spicatum (Pepe, 2001). More restoration work happened in the 1901 until 1940. Luigi Cozzo arrived at the very bottom as he excavated the underground of the arena. Restoration works were done in 1978 and a private bank financed repairs from 1992 to 2000 (Pepe, 2001).

Construction and Design

The Colosseum was built almost remarkably fast by Emperor Vespasian around 72 A. D. and was opened under the regime of Emperor Titus (picture on the right) on 80 A. d. It took about ten years to complete the construction of the Roman Colosseum or Amphitheatrum Flavium. Although it was built on a fast pace it was carefully planned due to the fact that there was once a lake found near the Colosseum. An example of this well planned construction was the drains found beneath the Colosseum with the size of 8 meters or 26 feet so that the streams of water brought about by the hills and valleys will be drained and protect the structure. (Hopkins, 2003)

The foundations of the structure is an elliptical or doughnut shape made of concrete which is about 12-13 meters deep for the outer wall and only 4 meters deep for the inner ellipse or wall. Although the design was impressive and carefully planned the cost was likely controlled. (Wikipedia).

The design was basically from an unknown architect but we can figure out that this was carefully designed through scale models or perspective drawings made basically by sketches of artists. The building on its being difficult and being huge, such details were carefully planned which work was made even before the start of the construction. This structure is created and based according to architectural principles especially in the construction of amphitheaters. (Hopkins, 2003)

The idea is basically to build an arena which is about 300×180 Roman feet (approximately around 29.6 m per roman foot). But through reconstruction it was built at around 660 Roman feet long and 540 Roman feet wide. The Perimeter can be estimated to around 1,885 Roman feet, such perimeter is

important so that the number of equally sized entrance arches can be determined at around 80 entrance arches. The size of this entrance arches were around 20 Roman feet wide with 3 Roman feet columns in between the arches. Carefully crafted and planned with the size involved it was built according to what is planned by this great architect.

If we will look at the Colosseum we will be confronted with series of squares within the framing of the arches. This detailed design reflects the preoccupation of the architect with the principles of number, which gives the viewer the steady and harmonious rhythm.

The columns around the Colosseum is composed of three storeys with each storey is composed of different column. Tuscan on the first storey, Ionic on the second and Corinthian at the third, the fourth storey has pilasters decorated with Corinthian capitals.

The exterior of the Colosseum has glistening gilded bronze shields at the top, and statues of emperors and gods were placed in the arches. There are two grand entrances, one is where the emperor enters and also by other official presenters. These entrances were marked with by giant porticoes, and on the top is a gilded horse-drawn chariot. The private entrance of the emperor goes under the seats and emerges in the imperial box.

The main objective of the Colosseum is that the venue could easily be filled by spectators in times of events and could easily be evacuated in times of disasters. Spectators access their seats via vomitria or vomitrium, these are the passageways that are opened in order to accommodate the spectators

(Hopkins, 2003). These are also used so that the crowd would easily be dispersed upon the end of the event and could easily permit their exit in times of emergency situations. This solution is still applicable to today as used by modern day stadiums to deal with such kind of problem.

This amphitheater is surrounded by eighty entrances at the ground level 76 of which is used by ordinary citizens. All of these entrances are numbered as well as each staircase. The emperor uses the northern main entrance together with his aides and the other three axial entrances where most likely used by the elite citizens of the society. All of these four entrances are decorated with painted stucco reliefs. Since most earthquakes have destroyed the Colosseum many of the original outer entrances have been destroyed or have collapsed, as of now only the entrances XXIII to LIV have survived the earthquakes (Hopkins, 2003). The attached picture shows the number LII on the top of the entrance. The attached picture shows the number LII on the top of the entrance.

The Colosseum was estimated to accommodate 87, 000 people, but modern estimate was around 50, 000. Each seat represents the social class of the people during that time. There are also special boxes or platforms for the Emperor and Vestal virgins which has the best view of the arena (Hopkins, 2003).

There are also special boxes or platforms in line with the Emperor which is provided for senators which has podiums in them. The names of these senators can still be seen today which is carved in these special boxes most likely presumed that such space is reserved for them. Above the senator we

can find the seats which is for the nobles and knights, while the next level is occupied by ordinary roman citizens. The lower level was exclusively for the wealthy citizens while the upper part was for the lower class.

Significance to Roman Society

In the article of Diana De Jesus, et al. (2004) stated that the public performances that we on in these arenas not only entertained people but also reinforced Roman values and social structure. It was the monument of Roman might. The events that took place at the Colosseum were violent and reflected the importance of military skill in Roman culture (De Jesus, 2004). Vespasian maintained and fostered the minds of Romans the values of discipline, courage, and skill in combat, all things that had helped make Rome great through the games held in the Colosseum.

The combat events included battles between people (*munus gladiatorum*), animal hunts (*venationes*), and miniature recreations of naval battles (*naumachiae*). Gladiators were usually criminals or slaves and if one is skilled enough they could likely become celebrities in Rome. Though there are many types of gladiatorial fights, reenactment of famous battles is a favorite of the crowd. These battles could follow invented story line and usually have a fatal outcome (De Jesus, 2004).

The life of fallen or wounded gladiators lies in the hands of the emperor who makes decisions based on the shout of the crowd. A wounded gladiator can raise his arm to appeal for mercy from the emperor (De Jesus, 2004). A

thumbs-up sign means his life is spared while a thumbs-down could mean an end.

Animals were also used in the Colosseum to reenact hunting which was a noble and important activity for the aristocracy and having a great number of animals, and especially exotic animals, brought into the Colosseum showed the people how much wealth and power the Emperor had.

(Bomgardner, 2000)

The Colosseum for the Roman society is also a place where one must be seen to reinforce his or her status. De Jesus noted that the reason that many people had for going to the Colosseum was not simply to see the show, but also to be seen themselves. The Colosseum follows a strict seating arrangement where spectators were segregated based on many things including government and military standing, citizenship, gender, marital status, age, profession, and the social status of a person's family (De Jesus, 2004).

Tickets were also distributed based on social status. Those who belong to the upper status have the most number of tickets. These are in turn distributed or given to clients and connections and continue to trickle down to the social pyramid until they reached the lower levels (Bomgardner, 2000) the distinct levels of Roman society would be publicly displayed and reinforced in every event attended in the Colosseum. The emphasis on the display of the social order was clearly seen in the seating arrangement. The best seats were those closest to the ring and where emperors and officers have special boxes. This was an important factor in public entertainment.

According to Pepe (2001) there were five orders of seats (see the picture): the podium, with wide and low steps where the privileged could place their personal chairs. It was reserved to the senators, to most important priests, the clarissimifrom senatorial families, viri consulares, magistrate etc. the maenianum primum, the maenianum secundum imum (lower), the maenianum secundum summum (upper), the maenianum summum in ligneis, also called proticus (it's the top portico with wooden seats, not indicated in the picture on the right).

Many people were not particularly in favor of the violence that occurs within the walls of the Colosseum. However, toughness and military skills was upheld in the Roman Empire. Wealth and power of the Roman Empire was clearly displayed in the Colosseum. It also made the distinction of classes clear to all. The Colosseum also served the purpose of providing a venue for the people to enjoy themselves, taking their minds away from the problems and worries. Within this, it was also easier for the emperor to rule (De Jesus, 2004).

The architectural significance of this building is also undeniable in its scale and size. Lyes (2000) in his article however said that it is not particularly revolutionary building as precedents can be found for most of the aspects in architecture. Earliest permanent amphitheatre had been constructed as far back as 80BC by Marcus Porcius at Pompeii which is said to differ very little from that of the Colosseum (Lyes, 2000).

While its architectural design and building method may not be new during the ancient time, the political and social significance that it represents in the

Roman Empire is incomparable. The fact that it still stands today is a testimony to its sheer power. As Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) wrote “ While the Colosseum stands, Rome Stands; when the Colosseum falls, Rome falls; and when Rome falls, the world falls!” The Colosseum was not just art, but it was a testament to Roman Power.

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