

Relationship between architecture and ancient beliefs

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



The relationship between the architecture of religious buildings and a culture's spiritual conception of god, the afterlife, or the path towards enlightenment is extremely evident in the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Buddhist cultures. The structures that these people built, were not made just for a place to worship. They represented many things to their builders, but mostly they represented the way to " heaven. " To the people of ancient Mesopotamia, their temple was the home of their god. The temples were built on top of large " stepped" brick structures called ziggurats. On the outside, they might have covered the lower " steps" with dirt and planted trees and bushes to give the illusion of a temple on top of a mountain. In the inner sanctuary of the temples they would place a statue of the god that that temple was dedicated to. The temple was believed to be the dwelling place or home of the gods. It was the priest's responsibility to care for the gods and attend to their needs, and only the priests were allowed to enter the temple. As a result the priests were very powerful members of the Mesopotamian society. The main idea of raising the temple on this structure was to bring the worshipper closer to the gods. One prominent belief is that the ziggurat provided a bridge between heaven and earth. The priest's ascent up the stairway to the temple represents the ascent to heaven. The ziggurat was usually placed at the center of the city, making it a central part of everyday life. The people most likely felt a certain connection, a closeness to the gods that was not present before the ziggurat. In the ancient Egypt, death was not the end of life but rather the beginning of a new form of existence. The Egyptians believed that a person was made up of a ba, a ka, and a body. The body was the vessel that the ba and ka resided in. The ba

was the personality of the person, and the ka was the spirit of life that was transferred from the creator to each living person. When death occurred the ka was believed to separate from and the body, and after death, the ba and the ka would reunite allowing the person to live on in a spiritual form rather than physical. This new form of life was considered to be immortal and was represented by the akh. Each night, it was believed that the akh would return to the body to rest. So to protect the body, the Egyptians built. But these tombs served a double purpose. Not only did they protect the bodies from the elements, they also provided instructions and a way to the afterlife. The most important tombs were those of the pharaohs; the pyramids. The ideal destination of the pharaoh after death was the sky. The pyramids provided the place for the spiritual rebirth to take place and for the pharaoh to find his way to the afterlife. The original stepped pyramid was believed to provide him with a staircase to the sky. Later, the pyramid transformed into a true pyramidal shape, a symbol of the sun's rays, which was another way the pharaoh could ascend to the heavens. Inside the chambers of the pyramid, the walls were lined with spells and incantations for the pharaoh to recite to assure him a successful journey into the afterlife. Everything that the pharaoh might need in the afterlife was also provided for him. Things like furniture, food, drink, clothes, were all left in the chambers inside the pyramid. All the items were to make the pharaoh afterlife as comfortable as possible. The Buddhist stupa has its origins as a burial mound monument for important public figures. The Stupa became spiritually important to all of Buddha's followers. The Buddha Shakyamuni had ordered his disciple to place his ashes in a monument so his life would encourage and inspire others

to achieve enlightenment. When the Buddha died, eight different kingdoms claimed to be the rightful inheritor of Buddha's ashes. No one could decide who should get sole possession so his remains were divided among the eight kingdoms. Each kingdom built aesthetically different stupas to house the remains. The eight stupas became symbols of the eight major events in the Buddha's life. They also stood for the eight-fold path to enlightenment that the Buddha had taught. But the stupas mean so much more to the Buddhist followers. The architectural design of the stupa themselves are full of symbolic meaning. The square foundation of the stupa stood for the earth while the dome represented water. The harmika, a square on top of the dome, usually a fence, represented fire and the pole extending from the center of the harmika represented air. The umbrella shaped feature on the pole was a representation of space. When a person views a stupa from above they would see a mandala, a circle inside a square inside a circle. This symbol is the spiritual representation of the universe. But the stupa is even more than this. There are four steps at the base of the stupa. Each of these steps for a separate trait the Buddhist must achieve to have. The first step is for the four foundations of mindfulness, the second for the four efforts, the third for the four psychic powers and the fourth for the five faculties. There is also a fence and a path that leads around the stupa. The stupa were built so that every aspect would help to guide the believers along the path to enlightenment. Ancient cultures expressed their conceptions of god, the afterlife, and the path towards enlightenment through the design and architecture of their religious buildings. Mesopotamia's view of god was expressed in the development the ziggurat; the Egyptians help their dead

kings achieve a successful afterlife through the pyramids; and the Buddhists followed their path to enlightenment through the symbolic messages built into the stupa. Each building had a significant role to play in the beliefs and lives or deaths of their respective culture.