THE GEHRY MOVE

Introduction to a speech, “Thinking Out Loud,” by Frank O. Gehry
Institute for Advanced Study, March 16, 2011

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Frank Gehry's buildings do something that no building had ever done before—they move. They all do, in one way or another, as they have done from the beginning. The Paris Opera House bustles inside and out with looping curves, voluminous spaces, and surfaces that pullulate with lively ornamentation (**Figs. 1, 2)**; but it is essentially symmetrical, weighty, and stable. The little church of San Carlino in Rome, by Gehry's favorite architect, Francesco Borromini, is a complex configuration, inside and out, in the horizontal and vertical planes, with intersecting shapes and spaces (**Figs. 3, 4, 5);** but it too is symmetrical, regular, and ultimately stabilized by its strict geometrical organization.

By way of introduction, I want to consider briefly three instances of one theme of Gehry movement that might be called the interplay between soft and rigid materials.

The action of Gehry's architecture first burst upon the popular imagination in May 1993, when a public meeting was held in the main city square of Prague to debate the projected new office building Gehry had designed for a prominent site on the bank of the River Vltava for a Dutch insurance company (1992-96) **(Fig. 6)**. The adjoining residential building was the home of Václav Havel (it had been built by Havel's architect father), the leader of the Velvet Revolution that had only recently liberated the country from a viciously repressive Communist regime. Many participants in the meeting, which was itself a popular demonstration of the rebirth of freedom, loved the building and defended it passionately. Others thought it outrageous and said so in no uncertain terms. One wag shouted out "it looks like Fred and Ginger!" Once pronounced, the label is of course unforgettable. The name stuck: in Prague they still call it, now affectionately, "Fred and Ginger," and it has become the very embodiment of the dancing in the streets that celebrated the city's economic and political revival.

A comparably improbable conflation of inherently un-rigid material with architecture, with equally emblematic results, may be discerned at Bilbao **(Fig. 7)**. It has often been noted that the effulgent, swelling and perforated forms recall the billowing sails of a wind-borne vessel. Gehry does enjoy sailing, a lot, and he watches the sails full, trim, and luffing, with the eyes of an architect. Not coincidentally, I think, what affected him at Bilbao was the fact that the city was once a great port, of which the abandoned warehouses and derelict factory structures by the River Nervión became the site of the museum. Gehry paid homage to Bilbao's great shipbuilding tradition, which since the late nineteenth century had been based on exploiting the nearby iron and hematite deposits to pioneer in the construction of steel-hulled sailing ships. Gehry's titanium skin conjures up the sleek metal hulls into burnished newness, while the expansive and convoluted forms convey the invisible motive power behind the sails. But it is clear that Gehry also invoked Bilbao's medieval history, when its ships were among the most prized in the world and gave rise to the city's historic maritime commercial institution, the Consulado y Casa de Contratación, whose medieval escutcheon depicted its characteristic commercial vessel, the famous Bilbao *nao* **(Fig. 8)**. The citizens of Bilbao recognized all this when, at the opening of the Museum in 1997, they awarded Gehry a medal with the seal of the modern Casa de Contratación **(Fig. 9)**.

Most recently, at 8 Spruce Street (Beekman Place), **(Fig. 10)** Gehry materialized (or rather de-materialized) the standard construction technique for modern skyscrapers in New York, which architects and engineers call the "curtain wall," that is, the building is constructed on a framework of interconnected steel girders, along the perimeter of which the so-called walls are literally hung, suspended, merely as protection from the elements, bearing no weight and gossamer thin. Everyone knows that skyscrapers sway in the wind, especially in the cavernous streets of New York, and 8 Spruce Street looks like a gigantic, shimmering and, pleated watered silk gown by the great Venetian couturier Fortuny **(Figs. 11, 12, 13, 14),** who succeeded in recreating the quasi-fluted, rippling and overlapping pleats of the costumes of archaic Greek Korai figures. Please bear in mind that Frank's mother was a drapery manager at a Los Angeles department store.

This leads me to what I feel is a certain precedent for what Gehry does. I refer to the so-called refinements that animate ancient Greek temple architecture, where the shapes are almost never really straight. The stone blocks are exquisitely tapered so that the stylobate subtley rises and falls **(Figs. 15, 16)**. The columns are spaced at varying intervals and they expand and contract with varying degrees of entasis. The pediments are not rigid triangles. These deviations, which may occur here and there throughout the building are normally explained as "corrections" for the distortions which our optical system is said to create. I am one of those who, like John Ruskin, think their principle effect was often optically imperceptible but always psychologically profound, **(Figs. 17, 18).** To me the refinements, visible to us or not, respond to the fact that the temples are alive, they inhale and exhale, they breath, they heave and they ho; they are alive because they are the home, the very in-dwelling place of the spirit of the deity to whom they are devoted. Perhaps Gehry's buildings are their avatars.

Fig 1. Tony Garnier, Opera House , Paris.

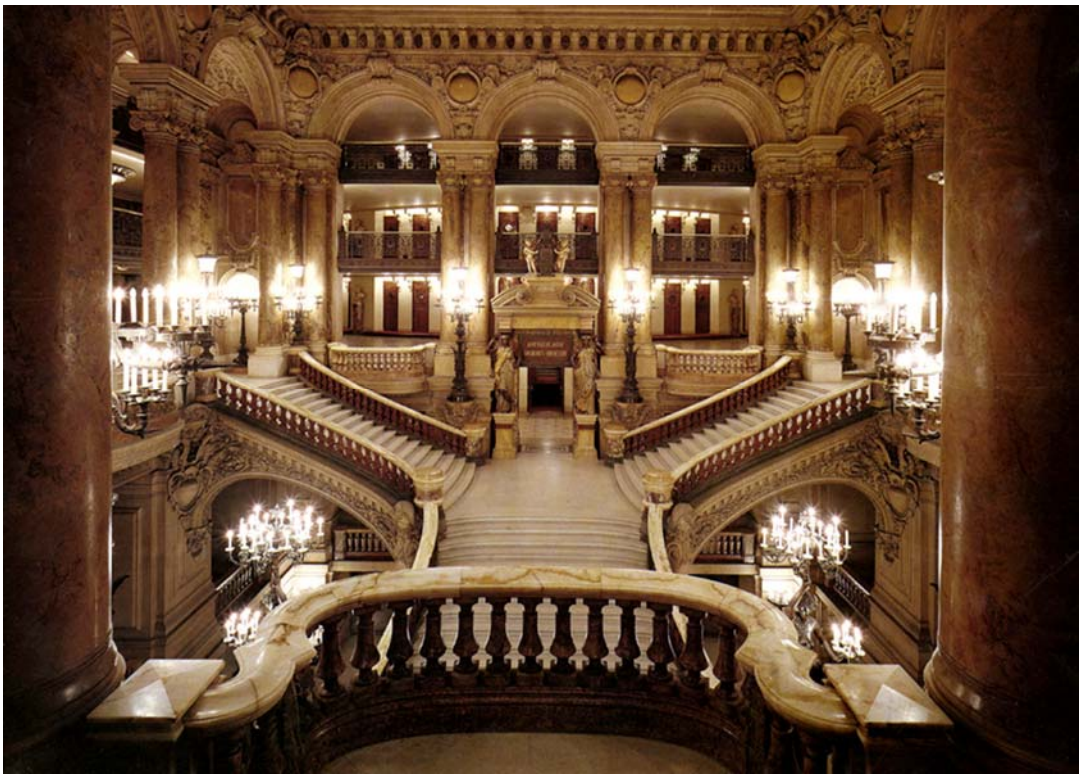

Fig. 2. Tony Garnier, Grand staircase. Opera House , Paris.

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Fig. 3. Borromini, San Carlino, Rome.

Fig. 4. Borromini, Cupola, San Carlino, Rome

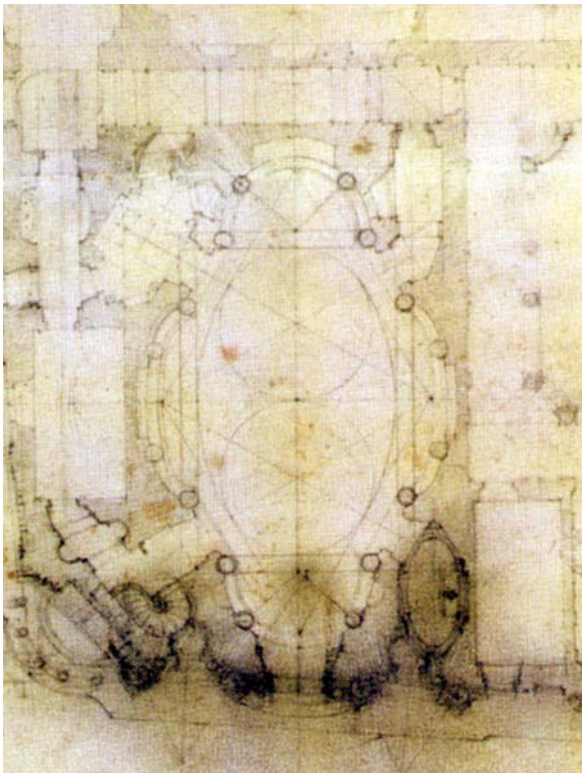

Fig. 5. Borromini, Drawing for San Carlino, Albertina, Vienna.

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Fig. 6. Gehry , Nationale-Nederlanden Building (“Fred and Ginger”), Prague.

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Fig. 7. Gehry , Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao.

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Fig. 8. Coat of Arms of the Casa de Contractación,
Euskal Museoa-Museo Vasco, Bilbao.

Fig. 9. Seal of the Casa de Contractación de Bilbao.

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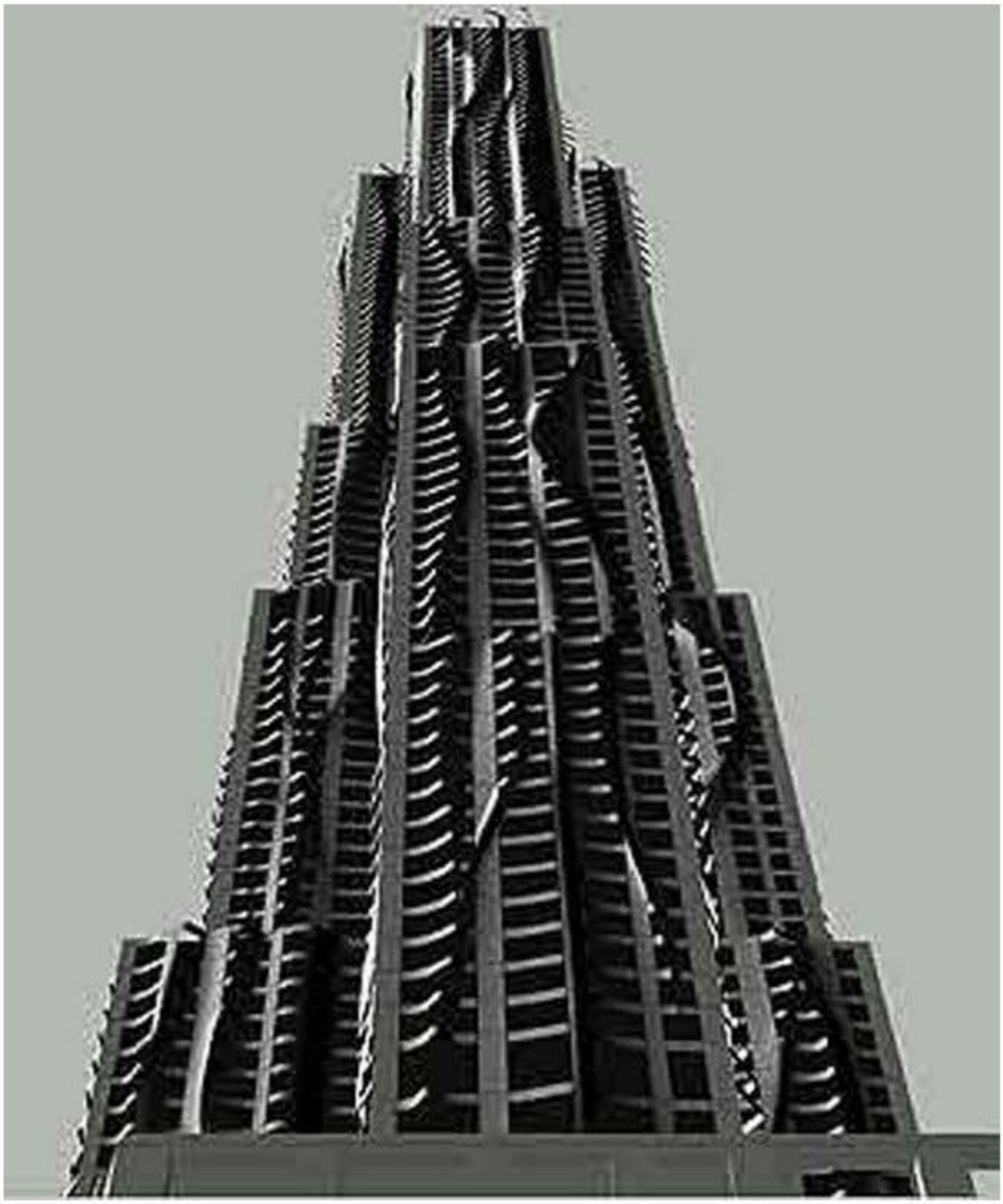

Fig. 10. Gehry , 8 Spruce Street (Beekman Place), New York.

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Fig. 11. Fortuny , pleated silk gown.

Fig. 12. Gehry , 8 Spruce Street (Beekman Place), detail.

Fig. 13. Fortuny , pleated silk, detail.

Fig. 14. Kore 583, Acropolis Museum, Athens.

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Fig. 15. Athens , Parthenon.

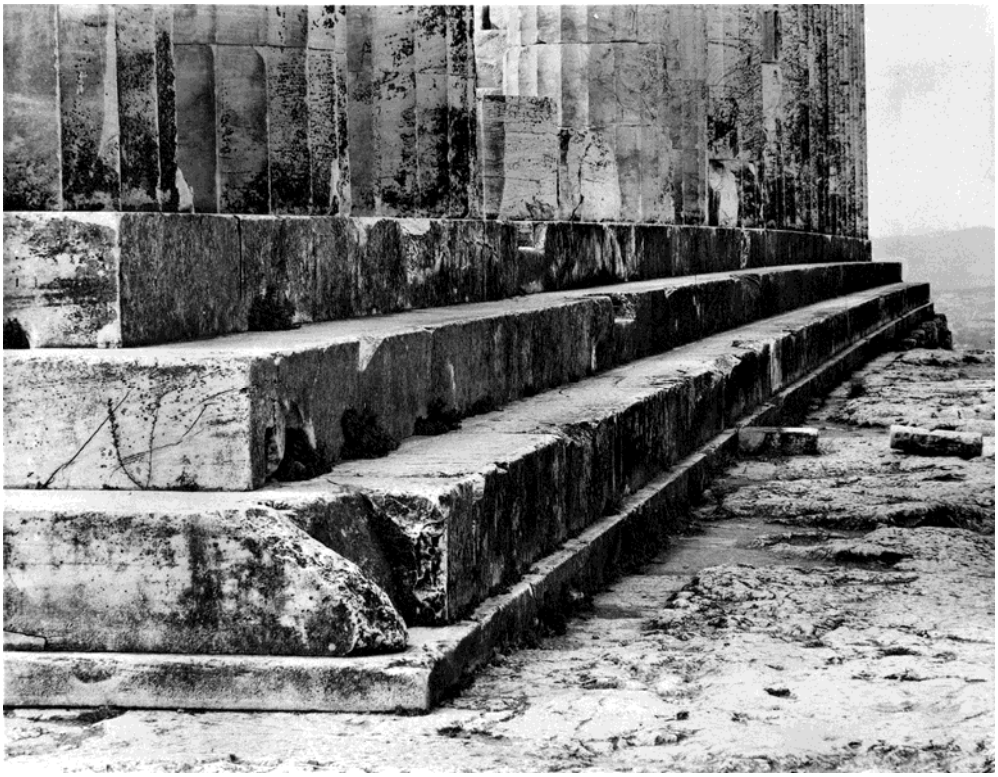

Fig. 16. Parthenon, detail of sty lobate (after L. HASELBERGER, ed., Appearance and essence : refinements of classical architecture –curvature , Philadelphia, 1999, fig. 1.1).

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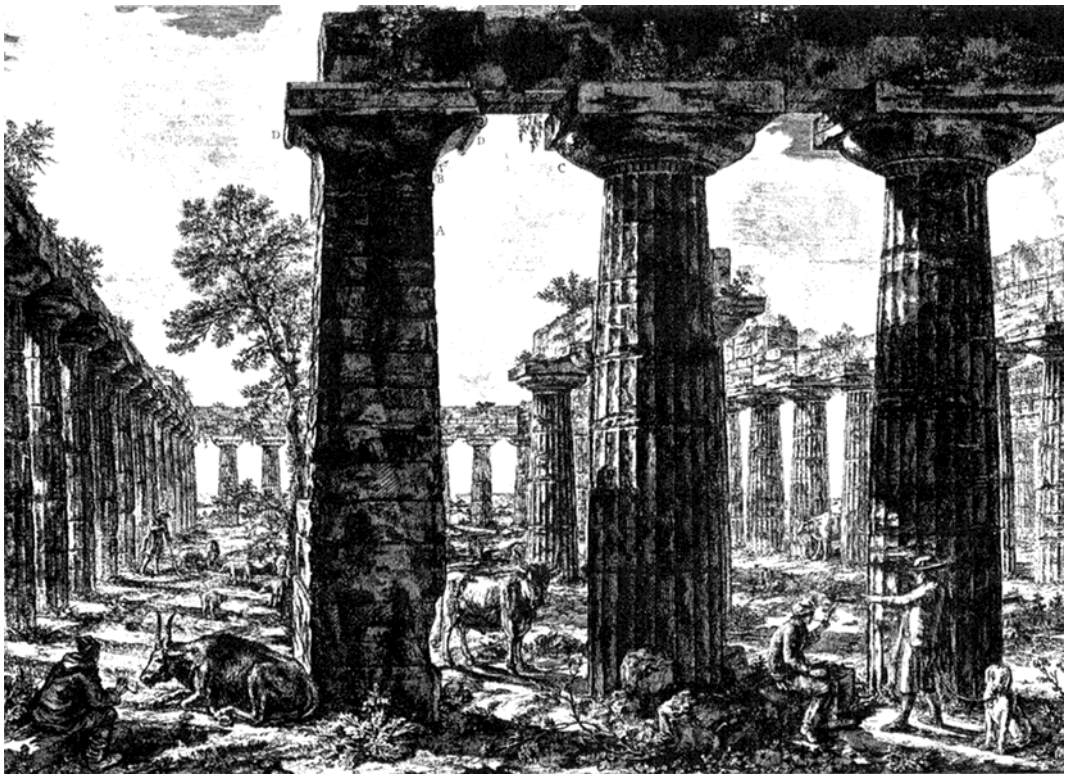

Fig. 17. Piranesi, Basilica at Paestum (after HASELBERGER, fig. 1.27)

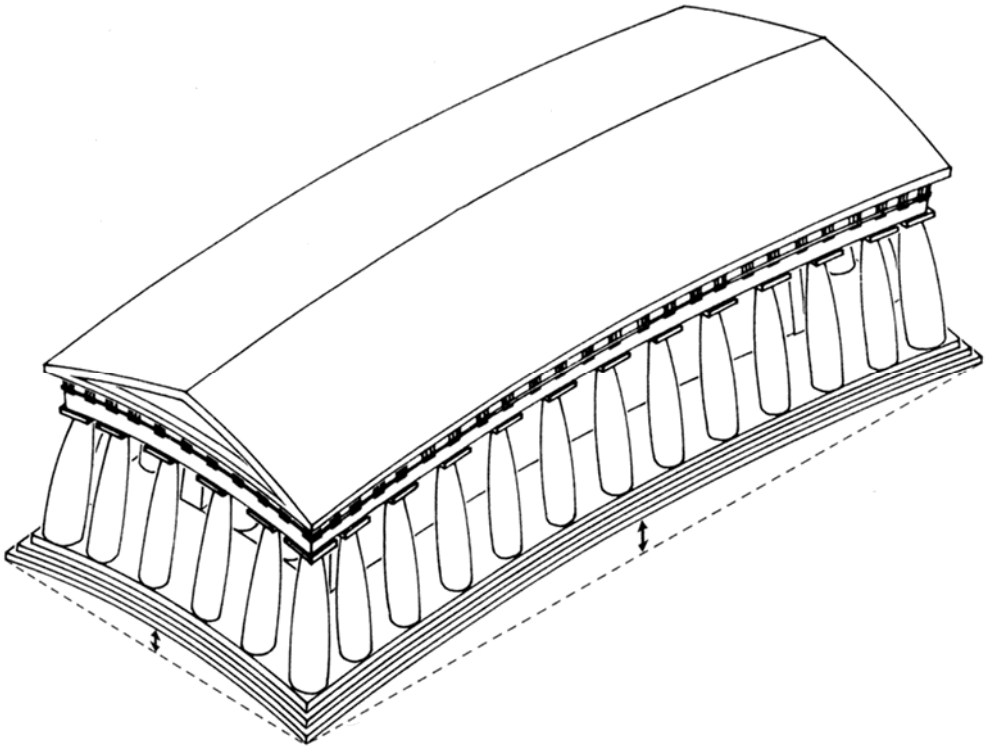

Fig. 18. Optical refinements of Greek temple (after HASELBERGER, fig.1.4).

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