

The ashes of Academy: a date and a few questions to spark a debate

Nicola Delle Donne

Former Assistant Professor at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals

Abstract

A traumatic event occurred in the most violent phase of the French Revolution on August 8, 1793: the abolition of the Académie royale d'architecture. Such an event was bound to mark an unprecedented moment: questioning and rejecting the official knowledge dispensed by academic institutions. This article provides a historical background for a possible contemporary debate focused on the following provocative questions. Which institutions represent official knowledge in the field of architecture today? How should architects and docents deal with the claims of these institutions? Should they silently accept or openly criticize them?

Keywords: Abolition of Académie royale d'architecture, Theory of Architectural Character, Pluralism

The French Revolution is mostly associated with the year 1789 and with events like the Tennis Court Oath, which took place on June 20, or the capture of the Bastille of July 14, which did not have immediate relevance for architecture. Instead, a decisive date is August 8, 1793, the day on which the *Convention nationale* (National Convention) decreed that all royal academies should be shut down, following the advice of Jacques-Louis David, the “painter of the Revolution”, who regarded those institutions as a legacy of the aristocratic and royal power that had just been defeated.

In which sense can this episode be considered a watershed moment, a threshold or, more accurately, a point of no return for architects and architecture? If *terreur* (the age of terror) did function as an accelerating factor for processes that had been under way for some time, the closing of the *Académie royale d'architecture*, which was founded in 1671, created a decisive precedent, not only for disputing but also for dismantling the notion of official knowledge. In turn, this gave rise to new ways of understanding the body of knowledge of architecture and how it should be taught, and the very notion of architectural theory. While these changes came from a context of revolutionary fervor and the resulting propaganda, their effects were felt throughout the 19th century, during which an atmosphere of restoration prevailed, and during the 20th century, which delighted in being viewed as modern. And that's not all. They also posed a few questions that must be brought to the attention of our readers.

The Uncertain Theoretical Canon of Architecture

The closing of the Academy of Architecture resulted in a progressive loss of prestige for the role of the architect, as well as the dissolution of its disciplinary body of knowledge, as it had been understood at least since the Renaissance. In the more general context of the *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* (the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns), this process was ignited by the

renowned dispute between François Blondel and Claude Perrault (Pérez-Gómez, 1993). In the bulky section of explanatory notes to the second edition of *Les dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve* (The Ten Books of Architecture by Vitruvius) in 1684, Perrault had rejected all metaphysical foundations for the rules of architecture, thereby confining them to the realm of taste and of traditions. From that moment, it became clear that architects derived their prestige and their authoritativeness from power, through their inclusion in the sphere of the Academies, in exchange for formulating a notion of *bon goût* (good taste) such that it could be applied in a context of cultural policy with hegemonic aims. Once that power was removed, considerations of taste lost much of their appeal for the new bourgeoisie, which was preparing to occupy strategic political positions in order to govern the nation. The new bourgeoisie, which was more interested in building infrastructure projects like roads and railways instead of royal palaces and residences for the aristocracy, sided with engineers, who had been trained mostly at the *École royale des ponts et chaussées* (School of Bridges and Roads), founded in 1747.

Coincidentally, 1747 was also the year of publication of the second edition of *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle), a work that Charles Batteux had first published in the preceding year. It is in this text that architecture, along with eloquence, was definitively excluded from the category of imitative arts, which were reserved for mere pleasure, and was instead added to the category of practical arts, or arts that had to serve a material purpose. Only on rare occasions was architecture allowed to express symbolic meanings. Unlike arts like poetry, painting, sculpture, music, and dance, architecture did not have a natural model to follow. In his *Essai sur l'architecture* (Essay on Architecture), published anonymously in 1753 and republished two years later with the name of the author, Marc-Antoine Laugier attempted to invent the missing model by rehashing the Vitruvian archetype of the *cabane rustique* (the primitive hut). Even so, one of his admirers, Francesco Milizia, wrote in his *Principj di architettura civile* (Principles of Civil Architecture, 1781) that the model proposed by Laugier was a product of human ingenuity, not of nature. A few years later, Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy issued the definitive minimization of the theoretical importance of the primitive hut in the entry "Architecture" that he wrote in 1788 for the first of three volumes of the *Encyclopédie méthodique. Architecture* (Methodologic Encyclopedia. Architecture) devoted to architecture. On that occasion, he stated that the housing archetypes (caves, tents, and huts) should be regarded as *formes symboliques* (symbolic forms) that were completely irrelevant to the beauty of the buildings modeled after them. Such beauty, he affirmed, managed to emerge much later, when architects began to model their designs after the human body.

Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, architecture had found itself in an already precarious condition in the century that preceded the start of the French Revolution. On the one hand, it could not be counted among the scientific disciplines, in contrast with building technology and science; on the other hand, it could no longer be considered a pure art either, since, for the most part, it was expected to provide answers to practical problems, which only rarely required solutions of an aesthetical nature as well. So, while for over a century the *Académie royale d'architecture* had served as a sort of protective shell for the prestige of architecture and for the authoritativeness of architects, beginning with the summer of 1793 this function suddenly vanished. Henceforth, architecture would be required to constantly redefine its body of knowledge; likewise, architects had to begin contending with other professions in the field of urban and architectural design, in which – until that moment – they had been the primary, if not exclusive, players.

Architecture, as Taught to Engineers

After the *Académie royale d'architecture* was abolished, the scope of an architect's work diminished dramatically. Of the three Vitruvian categories, *firmitas* (strength) fell into the hands of engineers; *utilitas* (function) soon became an object of debate; and *venustas* (beauty), which should have rested entirely within the confines of architecture, was granted only indeterminate definitions, since the notion of *goût* (taste), which was responsible for producing its definition, suddenly seemed a hardly convincing aesthetic category.

In 1794, a new school called *École centrale des travaux publics* (Central School of Public Works) opened its doors. In 1795, it was restructured and renamed *École polytechnique* (Polytechnic). On being hired as a professor at the school in the same year, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand began to gradually perfect a method that removed all cultural content from the teaching of architecture, so that it could be taught to engineers in simplified form. In fact, it was his belief that even though engineers had more opportunities in construction than architects, they had little time to devote to architecture itself; therefore, they needed more succinct manuals instead of detailed theoretical texts (Szambien, 1984). Still, the teaching materials that Durand donated to the school do deserve to be remembered briefly.

His first work, published between 1799 and 1801, was titled *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tous genres, anciens et modernes, remarquables par leur beauté, par leur grandeur, ou par leur singularité, et dessinés sur une même échelle*, an extensive collection of architectural works, also known as *Grand Durand*, which was intended to represent the most important buildings in the history of architecture drawn to the same scale, to allow more direct comparisons between them. Durand never explained on what grounds he considered the models that he included in his work to be more remarkable than others in terms of beauty, size, or singularity. Even the long introduction titled *Histoire générale de l'Architecture*, authored by Jacques-Guillaume Legrand in 1799 and intended as a textual supplement to Durand's work, did not clarify the value judgement expressed by the author in the title.

His second work, which was divided in two volumes, printed in 1802 and 1805, respectively, was titled *Précis des leçons données à l'École polytechnique*, also known as *Petit Durand*. In addition to erasing the historic examples, Durand did the following three things: he normalized the orders of architecture, by rejecting their anthropological nature; he stated that architecture relied on standard elements, which had to be arranged according to criteria of economy and coexistence; and he provided personal projects of public buildings, based on use briefs that he had prepared himself.

His third work, which appeared in 1821 under the title of *Partie graphique des cours d'architecture faits à l'École royale polytechnique depuis sa réorganisation; précédée d'un sommaire relatif à ce nouveau travail*, shows that public buildings should no longer be classified according to their use briefs; rather, they should be categorized based on the number of interaxes that organized their elements, arranged along an orthogonal grid. Effectively, in the time between *Grand Durand* and *Petit Durand*, Durand removed history from his paradigm; and by the time he wrote *Partie graphique*, he had also eliminated the notion of use. What emerged victorious was composition for composition's sake, presented as the design of endlessly reproducible architectural combinations that were silent about their own use. The art of composition in architecture became a game of repetition, deprived of its intellectual and cultural dimensions, and conceived for a student who was preparing to simply become a professional practitioner.

The Theory of Architecture and Its New Assumptions

It is, at the very least, strange that the intellectual and cultural impoverishment of architecture as a discipline was the work of Durand, who had been a pupil of Etienne-Louis Boullée. In his *Architecture. Essai sur l'art*, which was probably written in the last decade of the 18th century and yet features projects that date back to 1781, Boullée had traced a clear distinction between the scientific elements of architecture, for *construction* (building), and its artistic elements, which were intended as *conception* (ideation). According to him, architects should focus primarily on the latter. To this end, he had articulated a fairly complex theory of *caractère* (character), which developed a theoretical concept that he had inherited from two of his teachers: Germain Boffrand, and Jacques-François Blondel. In his *Livre d'architecture* (Book of Architecture), published in 1745, Boffrand had defined character as the feeling that a building should inspire in an observer, so that he may recognize the reasons for which the building had been designed. And while Blondel never explicitly defined the notion of character (Picon, 1988), he used it in his *Cours d'architecture* (Course of Architecture), which he wrote between 1771 and 1774 (and was finished by Pierre Patte in 1777) (Middleton, 1959), particularly in the context of private architecture, to define a hierarchy of aesthetics through societal hierarchy. Boullée made a radical choice in excluding the idea of character from private architecture. He chose to focus it instead on public architecture, which in his opinion was the only kind of architecture that allowed architects to express the *poésie de l'architecture* (the poetry of architecture), and to highlight the civic and spiritual meaning of buildings. His theory of character posited different techniques of expression that, for reasons of brevity, we cannot dwell on in the present context (Etlin, 1994). Nonetheless, one of them must at least be mentioned. Boullée wished to modify the typology of existing buildings, and at the same time confer upon them a peculiar meaning through new ways of using them, and though new rituals. For example, he combined two types, *tholos* and *pantheon*, to design the *Opéra* theater as a temple to taste, dedicated to womankind. He envisioned covering the courtyard at *Palais Mazarin* under a large barrel-vaulted roof, in order to produce what would be a nave for a basilica of learned men. And he pictured emptying the Egyptian pyramids, to transform them into funeral buildings capable of hosting religious ceremonies.

The theory of character did not exist as a mere rhetorical exercise. It was actually a way of defining the theory of architecture as the potential reinterpretation of the history of architecture. A kind of reinterpretation in which the application of the proper orders of architecture to a building to suit its intended use was of little importance. The theory of character was peculiar in one way: at a time when norms and precepts had lost acceptance, it found its expression in the form of narration, as projects with accompanying commentary. In other words, it could be understood as a dramatic and prolific conflict between rhetoric and poetics, or between the conventional language of architecture and its most sublime embodiment. It is this kind of approach that allowed the contamination of classical language by pure geometrical forms.

Resources of the Artistic Part of Architecture

What does the theory of character have to do with the closing of the academies? For one thing, while the scientific side of architecture was eroding the scope of the artistic one, an event took place that offered architects the chance to articulate new themes in architecture. In the spring of 1794, the previously mentioned *Convention nationale*, triggered the season of *concours d'architecture* (architectural competitions), under the auspices of one of its recent creations: the infamous *Comité*

de salut public (Board of Public Health) (Szambien, 1986). While Boullée's essay made projects with accompanying comments one possible way of understanding history, such competitions, full of new building types, offered the opportunity for large-scale benchmarking. Even though those projects belonged to the general chapter of revolutionary propaganda, they began to demand from architecture something more than simple commemoration, for example, the expression of new civil and spiritual contents of the secular state. For the first time, civic buildings became more important than the king's palace. For the first time, the great French museum became a site where citizens could recognize the greatness of the nation. And, for the first time, nature began to be viewed in a spirit that embodied the deism of the Enlightenment and was granted the temples it deserved.

Examples of these new approaches in design, which had already been formulated outside academia, appeared as early as 1792, when the representative from the Seine district, Armand-Guy Kersaint, published a work titled *Discours sur les monuments publics* (Discussion on Public Monuments), which included as attachments projects by architects Jacques-Guillaume Legrand and Jacques Molinos, with commentary provided by the authors themselves in the form of *Mémoires* (1791). Among them, the most notable was the transformation of the burgeoning Church of the Madeleine into the palace of the National Assembly (Figures 1-2). It was a type of building that, during the same year, Boullée himself had envisioned as the "house of all citizens", with a façade that was supposed to represent a book made of stone, decorated with the new laws that had been demanded by the people (Pérouse de Montclos, 1994). Within the context of the competitions held in 1794, Durand – who had yet to become a proponent of the repetitive design method mentioned earlier in this writing – designed a *Temple à l'Égalité* (Temple of Equality), in which he employed the notion of character that he had inherited from Boullée; the very same notion he would later jettison with words of contempt. The building had been conceived as a "Museum of the Revolution" (Figures 3-4), which reinterpreted classical temples by making it accessible to the public to display the events of the Revolution painted over the interior walls. Durand also presented another project, in two versions: a temple for *decadi* (Figures 5-6) that was influenced by the introduction of the new revolutionary calendar and that presented itself as a sort of pantheon, in which a domed roof covered a great assembly hall intended for secular celebrations.

In 1794, the artistic side of architecture showed that it could still boast many resources, but it lacked the chance to use them. None of those projects were ever actually built. Nonetheless, the practice of *architecture de papier* (paper architecture) demonstrated the new theoretical possibilities of architecture, showing that even structures that never saw the light of day could spark new flames of architectural debate.

A Lost Opportunity and Some Unanswered Questions

The academy that did come back to life under reformed premises in 1817 was named *École des Beaux-Arts*, and its primary goal was to rebuild a climate of authoritativeness. However, it ignored, or at least it underestimated, the crisis that architecture had suffered over the previous century (Egbert, 1980). After about a century and half, it was radically changed in 1968, the year of youth rebellions. The last original contribution it produced was the treatise by Julien Guadet, printed in 1901 in four volumes, under the title *Éléments et théorie de l'architecture* (The Elements and Theory of Architecture). But even that work, which was relevant in many ways, did not leverage the potential of the theory of character. While on the one hand it did recognize its capacity for expressing the ethical values of architecture, on the other hand it relegated it to the realm of the

picturesque, as if it only pertained to a secondary aspect of the project. This notion was very distant from the teachings of Boullée, in which *conception* and *caractère* were used as virtual synonyms. In the new academy, character became once again a conventional template meant to regulate the specific architectural style that needed to be applied to this or that type of building, depending on its intended use, even though it had a larger catalog of styles to draw from. This generated the phenomenon known as eclecticism, which was exposed to the fierce criticism of modern architects.

As the theory of character underwent a process of trivialization, the narrative potential of architecture failed to endure. In his 1831 novel entitled *Notre-Dame de Paris* (The Hunchback of Notre Dame), Victor Hugo used the protagonist to remark on this disappearance, and to express his regret for it: *Ceci tuera cela. Le livre tuera l'édifice* (This will kill that. The book will kill the building). If architecture as narration did disappear, it was replaced by architecture as construction. This is perhaps why a work such as *Histoire de l'architecture* by August Choisy, which was published in 1899, has been so successful. In it, the history of architecture tended to coincide with the history of building techniques and systems. It is also significant that even a modern architect like Le Corbusier manifested great appreciation for it. After all, earlier on, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc had already turned to defining architecture as *art de bâtir* (the art of building) in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, which was published in ten volumes between 1854 and 1868 (Crippa, 1990). It was the same definition that Boullée, at the beginning of the 18th century, had openly rejected.

The date of August 8, 1793, marked the radicalization of the clash between the scientific side and the artistic side of architecture, which had consequences both in terms of its theory and of how it was taught. The true reason for its relevance, though, is what was said at the onset. The events of that year introduced an unprecedented possibility: the ability to dissent with official knowledge, to the point of dismantling it. A few questions for architects, especially those who work in education, consequently arise. Who represents official knowledge, currently? What do the teachings imparted by schools of architecture have to do with such knowledge? How can such teachings be challenged, if at all?

It is difficult to come up with clear answers; debate has to take its course. In this context, we can only make the following observation: all of these questions raise the issue of pluralism, which is an essential value in architectural education. And this observation seems to be even more true if we think that architecture is more art than science.

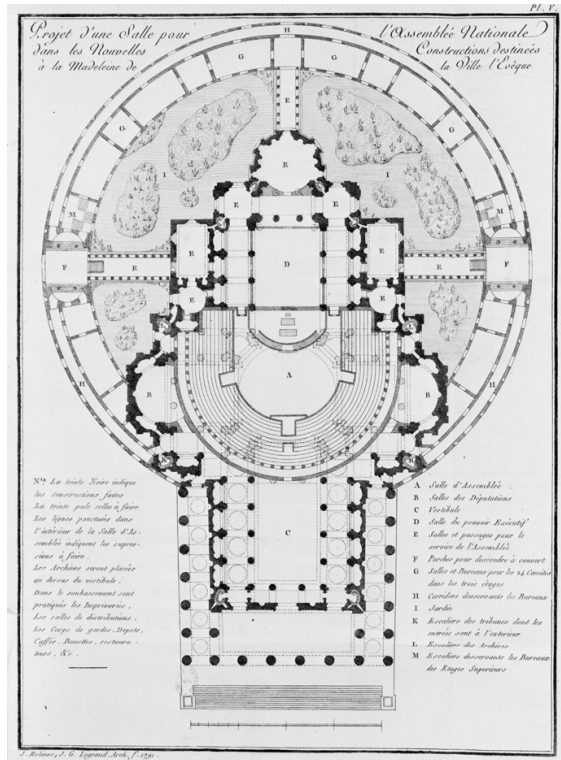


Fig.1. Plan of the project for the Palace of the National Assembly, Jacques-Guillaume Legrand (1753-1807) and Jacques Molinos (1743-1831) – 1791 [Bibliothèque nationale, Paris]

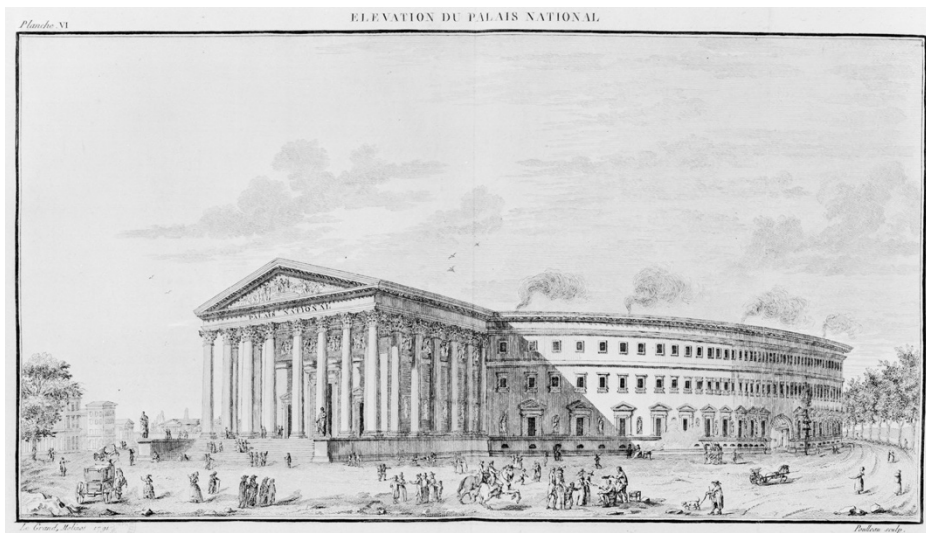


Fig.2. Perspective view of the project for the Palace of the National Assembly, Jacques-Guillaume Legrand (1753-1807) and Jacques Molinos (1743-1831) – 1791 [Bibliothèque nationale, Paris]

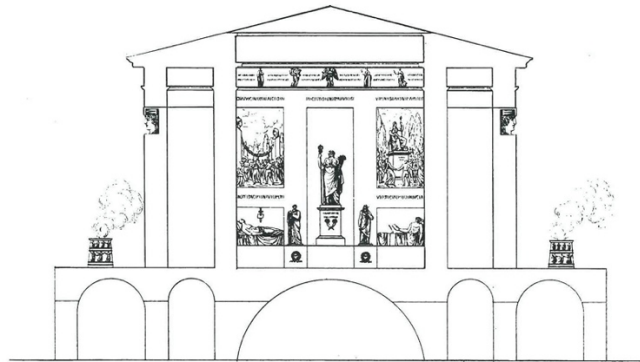


Fig.3. *Cross section of the project for the Temple of Equality*, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) and Jean-Thomas Thibault (1757-1826) – 1794 [École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris]

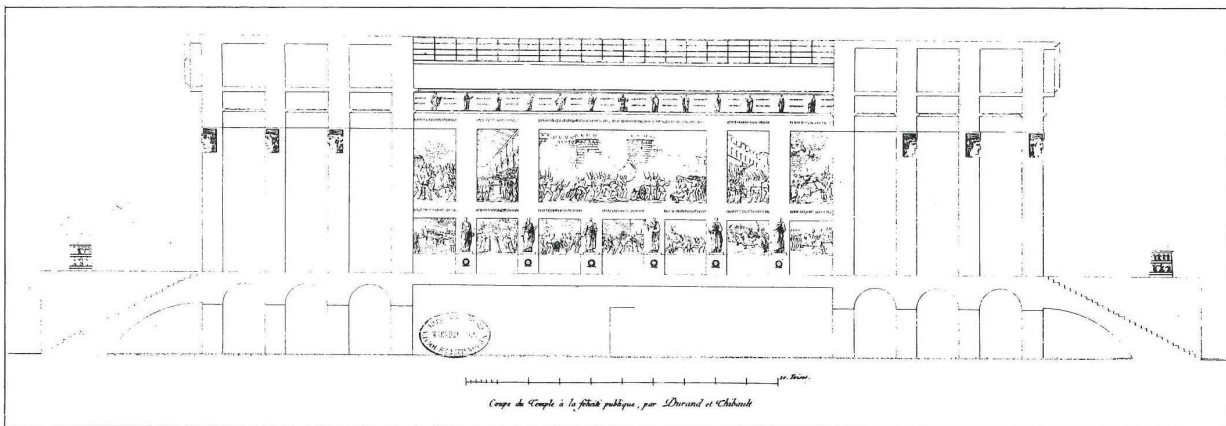


Fig.4. *Longitudinal section of the project for the Temple of Equality*, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) and Jean-Thomas Thibault (1757-1826) – 1794 [École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris]

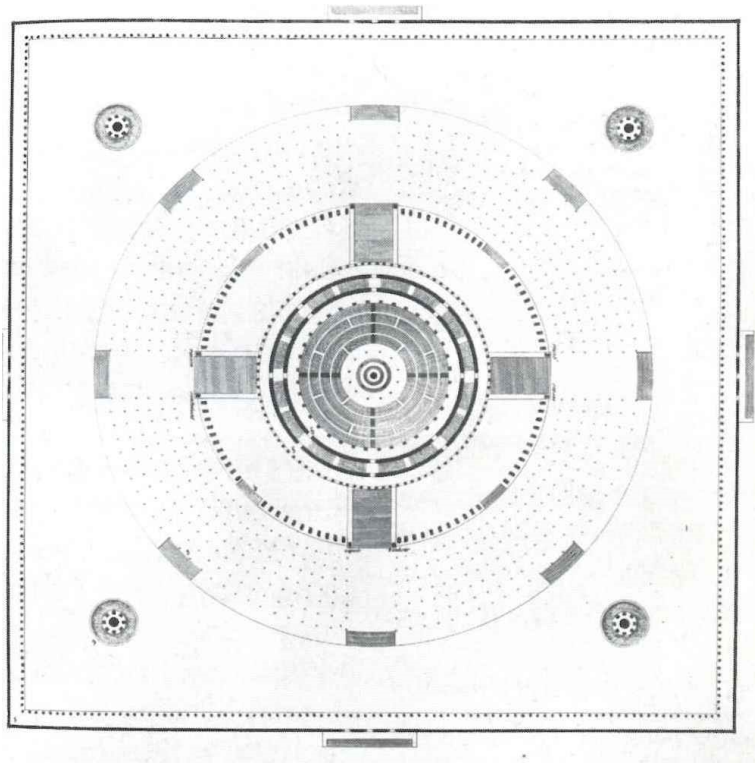


Fig.5. *Plan of the second version of the project for the Temple intended for the celebration of the Decadary Cult, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) and Jean-Thomas Thibault (1757-1826) – 1794 [Musée Carnavalet]*

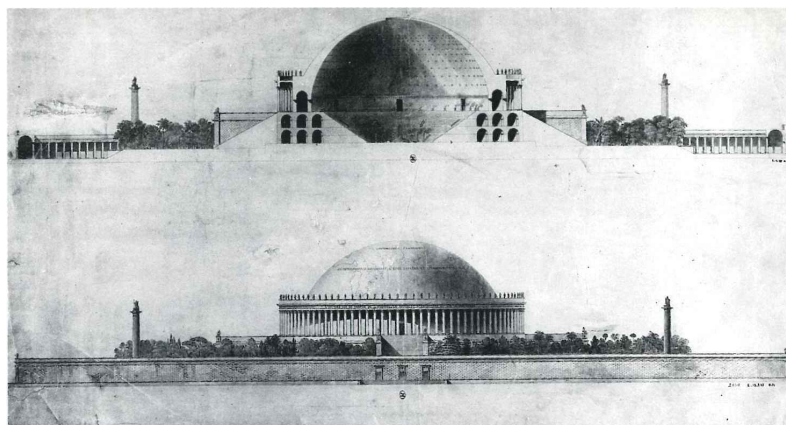


Fig.6. *Section and elevation of the second version of the project for the Temple intended for the celebration of the Decadary Cult, Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) and Jean-Thomas Thibault (1757-1826) – 1794 [Musée Carnavalet]*

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