

# ARCHITECTURAL COMPLAINTS

(An *Opera Buffa Dialettica* in 3 Short Acts)

BY JEREMY KARGON

Dramatis Personae:

## Vitruvius

Architect to Augustus

Author: *The Ten Books on Architecture*

## Imhotep

Architect to Pharaoh Djoser

Builder of the Stepped Pyramid

Deified by the Egyptians

## Frank Lloyd Wright's Mom

(In the guise of *Artemis of Ephesus*)

# I THESIS

*Scene begins: Vitruvius, leaning over a glowing Orbis Mundi, peers in and wrings his hands. Above and behind his head, images of buildings (reflecting what he sees in his orb) are projected.*

**Vitruvius:** Oh, dear.  
Oh, *dear*.  
Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear...

Proportion?  
Propriety?  
ORDER!

*Enter Imhotep...*

**Imhotep:** Marcus Vitruvius Pollio,  
again with the video games?

In my time, we used sacred cards and a holy scarab to divine the future, and that was good enough for us. What's bothering you so? What can you see?

**Vitruvius:** Oh, Imhotep, I simply can't understand it. What has happened to the Good and to the Godly? What has happened to Architecture?

Come see for yourself. *You're* an Architect...

**Imhotep:** [*Proudly*] The *first* Architect!

**Vitruvius:** ... and even if your designs were a bit plain...

**Imhotep:** [*Getting irritated*] I invented the Pyramids!

**Vitruvius:** ... well I'm sure you'll appreciate what I'm talking about. Come and see this.

**Imhotep:** *[Peers into the Orb]* We-e-ll...

**Vitruvius:** And this!

**Imhotep:** OK...

**Vitruvius:** And this!

**Imhotep:** Well, I *like* that...

**Vitruvius:** *[Irritated]* What are you talking about? It's clearly a monstrosity!

**Imhotep:** Oh, Vitruvius, what's bothering you? Times change, "Shock of the new," and all that.

*[To the audience]* I remember the first pyramid, well, let me tell *you*, that was a big deal. Pharaoh didn't like my crazy ideas at first, but...

*[Back to Vitruvius]* I think this building is bold and daring. It's interesting!

**Vitruvius:** Interesting? What does that have to do with anything? "I don't want to be interesting, I just want to be good," \* and you know who said *that*, don't you?

**Imhotep:** Well, you're the one with the crystal ball.

Besides, of *course* I wanted my buildings to be interesting. These were the first buildings out of stone -- never been done before!

Innovation is a natural consequence of curiosity, all the more so in architecture and technology.

**Vitruvius:** But I don't see here an expression of curiosity. I see here a realization of *Vulgarity*.

**Imhotep:** *[Guffaws]* H-E-Double-Toothpicks, Vitruvius!

**Vitruvius:** I *do* mean vulgarity, Imhotep -- a loss of both character and decency. You'll forgive me for quoting myself: "Commodity, Firmness, and Delight."

My Architecture sought an essential timelessness in its durability. My buildings were beautiful as well as convenient. They were certainly not trifles for the amusement of a stork king or his pond of frogs.

Has Time itself changed, Imhotep? Has the passing of each person's day gotten shorter or longer, my friend?

What's that place they found in Britain, you know, the circle of stones and lintels? Its builders sought to mark the longest and the shortest day, and the sun still rises true to their design.

"All architects want to live beyond their deaths," \* Imhotep. All true "Architecture" never dies.

**Imhotep:** *[Distracted]* To live forever... I know something about that. "Stork king and his pond of frogs..." I know something about that too...

Vitruvius, sometimes Timelessness itself fades from our desires. Not *everyone* wants to live forever, least of all those actually caught in perpetuity.

*[Aside]* That's why I *want* the world to change, you know, since I may not have a choice in the matter. And what changes us more than our own inventions, Vitruvius?

**...Imhotep:** “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” \*

If you lament our virtue as *Architects*, well, only *Architecture* must be to blame.

**Vitruvius:** [*Vaguely*] Architects...? Architecture....?

Oh, you’re right: *Architects*. [*groans*]

Remember that definition:

“Ar-chi-TECT, \är-ke-,tekt\, noun, One who believes that *conception* comes before *erection*” \*\*...?

**Imhotep:** [*Laughs*] Now who’s being vulgar?

**Vitruvius:** [*Also laughing*] Well, you know what I mean.

And now, of course, there are no more Architects, only specialists and their abbreviations and their acronyms: AIA, SOM, NCARB, LEED, W-X-Y-Z. There are no names, anymore, just capital letters strung out on the face of a door or in the encrypted signal of some digital watermark.

Whatever *that* means.

**Imhotep:** At least, in the past, there was a certain sympathy between us and process, between us and the world entire. Yes, I’ll agree with you there.

**Vitruvius:** Who dreams of being a specialist, or an expert in minutiae? Who is born with a fire, burning within, to be come a *technical consultant*?

I wrote *ten* books on Architecture, not just the one on door hardware.

**Imhotep:** Well, here’s a project which must give you some hope. Reminds me of some of my earlier designs, to be built by a small team of 10,000 laborers and slaves. The architect built it himself, more or less -- give or take 10,000 undergraduates.

**Vitruvius:** Impressive, impressive...

See, Imhotep, I haven’t turned my back on the thrill of a new idea. I’m craving, in fact, to encounter a *new* one. Something clear and comprehensible. Why all the confusion?

“No architecture is so haughty as that which is simple.” \* Surely, there must be men and women who still search for the sublime in simplicity. “Less is More” \*\* and all that...

**Imhotep:** “Less is a *Bore*,” \*\*\* Vitruvius. You can learn *that* on YouTube.

*Scene ends: Vitruvius and Imhotep, look back together towards Orbis Mundj. Lights out except for overhead projection of video sequence.*

## 2 Antithesis

*Scene begins: Empty Stage: Sounds fade in of manual construction, laboring, physical exertion.*

*Enter **Vitruvius**, miming the pulling of a heavy load.  
Enter **Imhotep** after him, whip held in hand, folded arms.*

**Imhotep:** Careful... careful.

*Projected above him is a video collage of a fantasy architectural design, cut in quick sequence to change and vary.*

***Vitruvius** still labors.*

**Imhotep:** More, more... further, further...

The strength of this gesture!  
The novelty of this form!

*Video collage continues. **Vitruvius** still labors.*

**Imhotep:** This will be my crowning achievement. My great glory to God. My Magnum Opus Numero Uno!

***Vitruvius** still labors. Suddenly, a great crash of sound explodes. The whip is projected out of **Imhotep**'s hands into **Vitruvius**'; **Imhotep** assumes **Vitruvius**' position and begins to mime his labors.*

**Vitruvius:** Careful... careful.

*Projected above him is a video collage of a different kind of architectural fantasy, more tranquil. **Imhotep** continues to labor.*

*[To the Audience] Our profession really is moving towards greater and greater collaboration. That's what's necessary these days: Teamwork. Everybody's got to pitch in, do the hours, stay the course. No one can go it alone. We're all in it together.*

*Another great crash of sound explodes. The whip is projected out of **Vitruvius**' hands into **Imhotep**'s; **Vitruvius** assumes **Imhotep**'s position and begins to mime his labors.*

**Imhotep:** Absolutely. No one can really master all the technical requirements of our profession, these days. It's all about specialization. And the choicest fruit is picked by the Architect who can reach the highest evolutionary tree: Who can assemble the best team, who can communicate clearly, and who can provide the best Client-oriented services for the lowest cost!

*Another great crash of sound explodes. The whip is projected out of **Imhotep**'s hands into **Vitruvius**'; **Imhotep** assumes **Vitruvius**' position and begins to mime his labors.*

**Vitruvius:** That's right, Teamwork! A better brand! Targeted client interfacing in a non-realtime workflow! Virtual environments, sustainable heuristics! Green "trashitecture," accredited two-way client-model win-win process path!

**Imhotep:** *[Throwing down his mimed load and wearily standing up.]* Are we done yet?

**Vitruvius:** *[Suspiciously]* Well, we're only at 98% phase completion, in advance of a post-rated 125% billing cycle.

**Imhotep:** Before or after the post-occupancy evaluations begin?

**Vitruvius:** At the very least, before the additional long-term longitudinal building-life assessments...

**Imhotep:** Excellent. *[Finding a place to sit.]*  
Then I need a drink.

*[Dreamily.]* “The architect represents neither a Dionysian nor an Apollinian condition: here it is the mighty act of will, the will which moves mountains, the intoxication of the strong will, which demands artistic expression. The most powerful men have always inspired the architects; the architect has always been influenced by power.” \*

Where are our Patrons for our Architectural will?

**Vitruvius:** Follow the money: That’s where they are.

Wealth has become folded into Institutions, like government agencies and publicly-held companies -- more than ever. So naturally, Architects have to follow suit!

“If we work with Bankers, we should dress like bankers.” \*\* Surely, you understand that Corporations only like to talk to other Corporations.

**Imhotep:** I didn’t know a business could talk...

**Vitruvius:** Security, continuity, assurance, reliability. You can’t find those in a one-person shop.

Expertise, deep-depth, millennia of collective professional experience...

**Imhotep:** *[Waves and grins]* That’s me...!

**Vitruvius:** Dependability, stability, verification, and quality assurance. Plan, Do, Act, Check!

**Imhotep:** Vitruvius, what is going on here? What are doing, and what are we checking? How are we coming to these decisions about our designs? What principles are guiding our choices?

**Vitruvius:** *[Becomes discrete, looking carefully around, pauses...]*  
Principles? Beliefs?

*[Suddenly]* Fear!

**Imhotep:** *[Startled]* Aaah!

**Vitruvius:** *[Reciprocally, stupidly]* Aaah!

**Imhotep:** Oh, stop that. What are we afraid of?

**Vitruvius:** “There’s nothing so timid as a million dollars.” \*  
Though these days I think it would take at least a million five to frighten me.

**Imhotep:** Be honest, Imhotep, what is there to fear? We’re Architects, not Lawyers or Tigers or Bears. Our buildings aren’t falling down or causing blindness to the eyes of sensitive young aesthetes. What do we have to be afraid of?

**Vitruvius:** Asbestos tile. PCBs in the transformers. Public housing towers. Have you forgotten all of our *good* ideas? The public hasn’t, and they haven’t forgiven.

**...Vitruvius:** All you need is a too-high door threshold and you have a Fair Housing Lawsuit demanding a damages 100 times your modest professional fees.

A forgotten toilet-paper holder, a misplaced grab-bar, or worse: A Design Review Board and a Community Council!

**Imhotep:** Aaah!

**Vitruvius:** Aaah!

**Imhotep:** Now wait a minute. Are you saying that our Architectural thinking is defined not by our principles but by our fear of making a mistake?

**Vitruvius:** Now, don't quote me on that...

**Imhotep:** I wouldn't dream of it.

**Vitruvius:** I'll give it to you in a written memo, with a copy to Human Resources.

**Imhotep:** *[Exasperated]* Don't bother...

You know, I'm not sure you're entirely right. There is some fairly decent work going on right now, just as there ever was. There are Architects, men and women, who are making principled choices about their designs, and who are strong enough to lead others in their direction.

I think it's wrong, what James Gaskin said: "Ignorance Transcends Architecture." That's wrong. We have both Architecture and Ignorance, and we have ourselves to choose between them.

**Vitruvius:** *[Recovering his former priggishness]* But, Imhotep, we are ignorant. They are ignorant. And they are making choices.

I'm speaking about the kind of ignorance "that should know better," the kind of blindness that thinks it sees with keen sight. You and I have watched these last 60 years, during which our cities have been eviscerated both by experts and their opponents. Every plan for the better was a change for the worse.

**Imhotep:** Well, you're right about that. New buildings that no one likes were presented as state-of-the-art successes. Then, they were given decorative facelifts to become newer buildings which supposedly *everybody* likes -- until, of course, it was time for the next facelift.

After so many years now, folks think that their *status quo* is the best of all possible worlds. If you talk to community groups from the saddest, most desperate neighborhoods about their vision for change, this is what you'll hear: "We like it just the way it is, thank you -- only give us more parking!"

**Vitruvius:** That's what I mean, Imhotep: *Fear*. We architects have trained our people to fear change -- and us!

**Imhotep:** In our day, Cities were the focus of our patriotic affection. But for years now our cities have represented the worst of our environment, the least desirable of our options. How can we convince people that the opposite is true: *Cities are our natural habitat*.

**Vitruvius:** Isn't that where we come in again, as Architects? We're here to lead -- by example.

**Imhotep:** *[Stretching out imaginary task whip.]* Then pick it up again, Vitruvius -- we have a lot to do.

**Vitruvius:** *[Picking up the imaginary burden, with resignation]* I know, I know, your Magnum Opus. But have we learned anything, Imhotep? What's going to be different this time.

**Imhotep:** "We cannot *not* know History," Vitruvius. We cannot *not* have learned... something!

Now, careful... pull!

*Scene ends: Imhotep drives Vitruvius off the stage.*

### 3

## Synthesis

*Scene begins: Frank Lloyd Wright's Mom enters from the opposite side from which Imhotep and Vitruvius have just left.*

**Mom:** Ungrateful bastards!

"You can't let the little pricks generation-gap you." \*  
*[Turns to Audience.]* You know who said that?  
I did!

But now we're all gonna get ours, let me tell you. The age of simalcrum is finally here, and you are going to bring it on. "Digital telepresence," "ubiquitous social computing," "casual digital networking." These will build our new cities and communities.

Of course, it's already here, that's what my boys don't seem to understand. They talk about Youtube, but they'd never use it.

Up 'till now, representations of things were all stiff and still -- even in the cinema, our greatest cathedral. But now... When will my boys figure out that our world has gone full circle: *Representation of a thing has again become the thing in itself!*

Of course, my Frankie knew that even a hundred years ago, but they wouldn't listen. It took his nemesis, The Crow, another 50 years. They had to invent television first, for him to catch on -- eventually.

*[Video of Poeme Electronique begins...]*

**...Mom:** From “Form Follows Function” \* through “The Medium is the Message,” \*\* it all leads to one thing: “Form and Function are One.” \*\*\*

Reenter *Imhotep* and *Vitruvius*.

**Vitruvius:** What’s that noise?

**Imhotep:** What did you say? There’s too much noise...

**Mom:** Hello boys!

**Vitruvius & Imhotep:** Hello, Mother.

**Vitruvius:** What is this place?

**Mom:** This is... Now! Today’s cathedral; the contemporary epoch’s vision; the millennia’s continuing dream.

**Imhotep:** MTV?

**Vitruvius:** I think she means more like a glorified *Facebook*...

**Imhotep:** Are we going to have that lecture, again?

**Mom:** *[As if in a trance.]* “Be gently lifted at nightfall to the top of a great downtown office building, and you may see how in the image of material man, at once his glory and menace, is this thing we call a city. There beneath, grown up in a night, is the monster leviathan, stretching acre upon acre into the far distance. High overhead hangs the stagnant pall of its fetid breath, reddened with the light from its myriad eyes endlessly everywhere blinking. Ten thousand acres of cellular tissue, layer upon layer, the city’s flesh, outspreads enmeshed by intricate network of veins and arteries, radiating into the gloom, and there with muffled, persistent roar, pulses and circulated as the blood in your veins, the ceaseless beat of the activity to whose necessities it all conforms...

“Its nerve ganglia!... a visible brain in intelligent action... manipulating steel as delicately as a mystical shuttle of the modern loom manipulates a silk thread in the shimmering pattern of a dainty gown.

“And the heavy breathing, the murmuring, the clangor, and the roar!-how the voice of this monstrous thing, this greatest of machines, a great city, rises to proclaim the marvel of the units of its structure...

“Nearer, in the building ablaze with midnight activity, the wide white band streams into the marvel of the multiple press, receiving unerringly the indelible impression of the human hopes, joys, and fears throbbing in the pulse of this great activity, as infallibly as the gray matter of the human brain receives the impression of the senses, to come forth millions of neatly folded, perfected news sheets, teeming with vivid appeals to passions, good or evil; weaving a web of intercommunication so far reaching that distance becomes as nothing, ... the doings of all the world reflected as in a glass, so marvelously sensitive this wide white band streaming endlessly from day to day becomes in the grasp of the multiple press.

“If the pulse of activity in this great city, to which the tremor of the mammoth skeleton beneath our feet is but an awe-inspiring response, is thrilling, what of this prolific, silent obedience? ...

“Thus is the thing into which the forces of Art are to breathe ill of identity! A SOUL!” \* *[Exhales, as if exhausted.]*

**Vitruvius:** *[To the Audience]* She always did like Frank more than any of us.

**Imhotep:** And, frankly, I’m not impressed. “Man is the measure of all things,” \*\* still, even in metaphor. That’s certainly not news, not to us. The question always remains: Which “man” do we measure? Why always a “man”?

**Vitruvius:** I should think that these days we've moved quite beyond that. Architecture today asks more questions than it answers. As perhaps it should.

**Mom:** *[Irritated]* Or perhaps we should just tell "Architecture" to shut up!

Leave us alone, while we dream our dreams...!

**Vitruvius:** Mother!

Architecture... and our dreams... are neither for discard nor for disdain. The history of culture's past -- *our* past -- is part of us, and we of it. That's the key to understanding our present and our future: Continuity both forwards and back.

**Imhotep:** *[With irony]* Even to include a... monstrosity? Surely, a monster *remains* monstrous.

**Vitruvius:** But... surely... it has become part of the story of our lives, in any case. Perhaps you're right: "Our Architecture reflects truly as a mirror."\*

Yet who in his age loves a mirror more than in his youth?

What... do... we *do*?

**Mom:** What else? We dream!

*Scene ends: Light on **Imhotep** and **Vitruvius** fades; **Mom** stands, illuminated, at the center of the stage.*

*Images continue above, as the light on **Mom** fades, too...*