

Architectural analysis is the process of understanding the purpose, construction, materials and character of a building. The following steps are designed to help you identify the important features of a building and to comprehend its cultural and architectural significance. Buildings, as opposed to artworks, are spatial entities that are difficult to study solely from images, so do make use of plan drawings, sections and elevations in your analysis.

Purpose: what was the original purpose of the building? Was it sacred or secular, domestic or mercantile? Who paid for the building? Why did they want it built? Who designed it? What was their relationship with the patron?

Site: where the building is located, and how does it relate to its surroundings? Is it incorporated into an urban fabric, or is it isolated and widely visible? How does it use the surrounding landscape or urban environment? How is the approach to the building designed? How does it relate to other buildings or monuments nearby?

Form: How would you describe the shapes of the plan and elevation? What kinds of construction methods and materials were used? What is their effect? What kind of ornament is used? How does it communicate with the viewer?

Spatial experience: What are the effects of height, proportion, light, colour, and acoustics? How do you navigate interior space? Are spaces soaring and high, or low and cramped? Are they restricted, or open? What is the experience of the visitor?

Historical context: How might the characteristics of the building be understood in relation to its historical context? Are the choices radically innovative, or do they look back to earlier models? What is the overall character of the building, what kinds of values or ideals does it convey? How does it relate to the society and culture of the people who produced it?

You can condense this checklist into the same formula we use for visual analysis:

1. Subject → purpose, site
2. Form → form, spatial experience
3. Historical context