The Erechtheum: Athens' "Untemple" by: Phyllis Young Forsyth

Almost everyone is familiar with the look of a typical Greek temple: a basically rectangular structure (usually twice as long as it is wide), surrounded by an imposing colonnade, and crowned by a gabled roof with a triangular pediment that is often filled with sculpture in the round; inside such a temple is normally found a main cult room (the naos) which held the statue of the god or goddess to whom the structure was dedicated. Such a temple, indeed, is the famous Parthenon, the very symbol of classical Greece and the architectural glory of Periclean Athens.

Yet, just across from the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis sits a temple that seems to break all the rules of temple lay-out: the Erechtheum. Named after Erechtheus, a legendary king of Athens most famous for the sacrifice of one of his daughters, the temple was erected in honor of Athena and Poseidon, the two gods who engaged in a contest to determine which one would become the patron deity of Athens. According to the legend, each offered the people of Athens a gift: Poseidon struck the rock of the Acropolis with his trident and brought forth a spring (although another version of the tale claims he created a horse!); Athena, however, brought forth an olive tree, and hers was deemed the better gift. Hence the city became Athens, and not "Poseidonia".

The places on the Acropolis where these events took place were held sacred by the people of the city, and eventually several sanctuaries came into existence. It was the purpose of the Erechtheum to unite architecturally these sanctuaries in a single structure, but to do so meant that a totally atypical lay-out had to be given the temple; thus it can be said that the history and nature of the site dictated the shape of the temple. Indeed, one of the most obvious problems posed by the site was a ten foot difference in level from the north to the south! The architects who began work on the Erechtheum in 421 BC certainly had to be innovative if they were to be successful.

The solution was to create a main block on an east-west axis, and two appended porches (one on the north side and one on the south) which gave the Erechtheum its unusual asymmetrical design. Inside the main block, a large naos (dedicated to Athena) would face the east, as was the norm in all temples, but there would also be additional cult rooms inside (unfortunately the precise plan of the interior is no longer clear). The North Porch, on the lower level of the site, was supported by tall Ionic-style columns, numbering six in all; it contained the sacred spot where Poseidon struck his trident, and the marks on the Acropolis supposedly left by this event were not paved over, but were left visible to all. In fact, an opening was made in the roof of the North Porch to enable light to illuminate these holy markings.

It is the South Porch, however, that is the Erechtheum's most famous element. Here, instead of Ionic columns, the architects employed sculpted figures of maidens to support the roof. These Caryatids (as they are now commonly called) numbered six in all, but each one was slightly different in appearance and pose, giving the porch a sense of natural grace and variety. Since the Erechtheum had no pedimental sculpture, these maidens provided the structure with a major sculptural element beyond the continuous frieze which ran around the entablature. So taken was Lord Elgin with these female figures that one stands today in the British Museum rather than on the Acropolis itself!

Since its completion in 405 B.C., the Erechtheum, unfortunately, has had a checkered history, even ignoring Lord Elgin's subtraction of a Caryatid. For example, it was converted into a Christian church in the Byzantine era, and then became a Turkish house around 1458. Then, in 1826, the building was badly damaged in an explosion which almost totally destroyed the North Porch. Even today its problems continue: the Pentelic marble of which it is composed is extremely vulnerable to acid rain corrosion; the Caryatids, in fact, were being so destroyed by acid rain in the past few years that the Greek government finally decided to remove them from the Erechtheum and place them in the nearby Acropolis Museum. Plaster copies were to be erected in their place on the South Porch. No sooner had this been accomplished than Athens was struck by a serious earthquake which split the new copies in two! And while we may regret the necessity of removing them from their true "home", we must do everything possible to preserve what remains, not only of the Erechtheum, but also of the entire Acropolis, all of whose structures are the victims of our own 20th century pollution.