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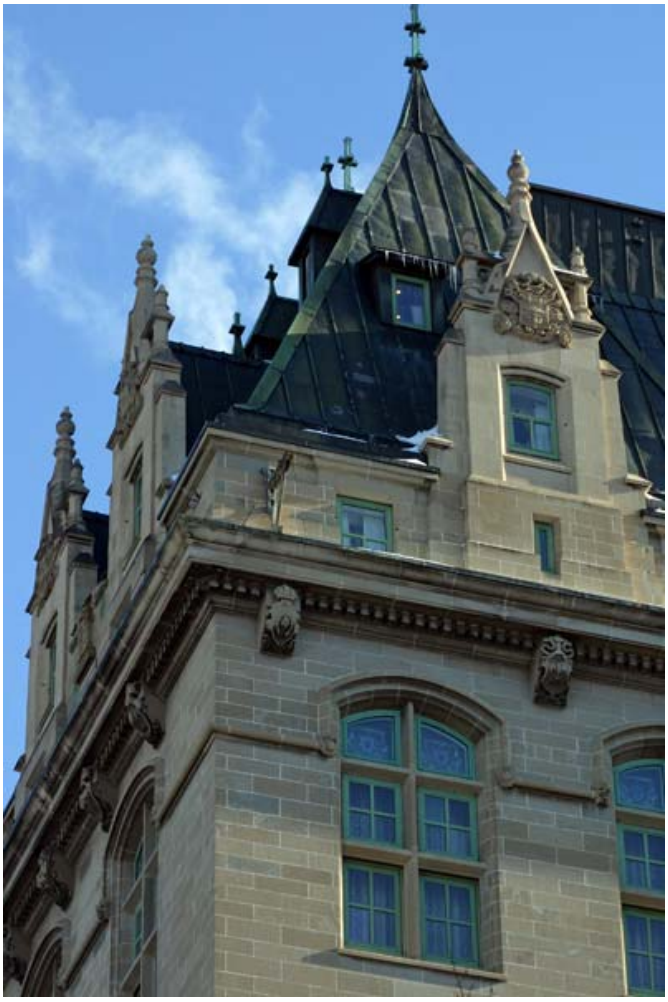
Glossary of Architectural Terms

Over the course of centuries, architects and builders have developed specialized terms to describe their buildings. This section of the guide provides definitions for some of the more common technical terms. It should be used with reference to other Historic Resources Branch materials that are part of this series (specifically *Architectural Styles in Manitoba* and *Historic Construction Materials and Techniques*) where technical subjects are also discussed. The contents of this section have been drawn from a larger glossary that is included in a more detailed branch publication, *Identifying Architectural Styles in Manitoba*.

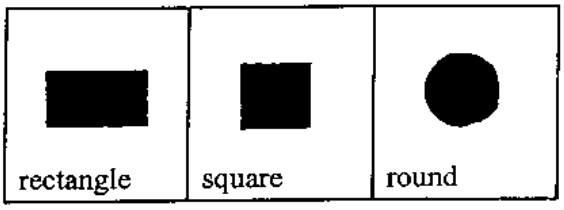
This guide groups terms according to how we generally perceive a building, from the large to the small. Thus we start with some of the terms that help describe a building's basic form: the plan and roof shape. Terms that distinguish certain construction materials and techniques are presented next. Windows and doors are often a source of great interest for designers and some of the key technical terms associated with those elements are noted here. Finally, the multitude of details that may be applied to a building are introduced, with some of the more common terms defined.

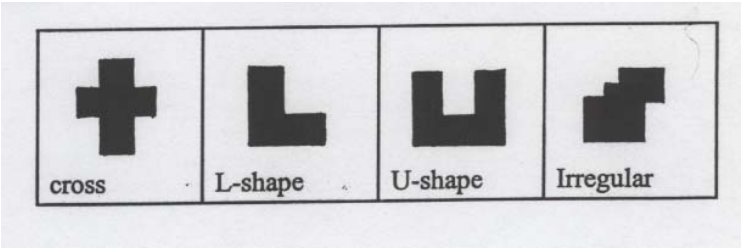


A host of architectural details, each with its own technical term, animate the Hotel Fort Garry in Winnipeg.

Plan Shapes

Whether for the sake of efficiency, cost, tradition, or style, building designers often look to a basic plan shape to determine the overall form, or massing, of their building. The most common shape is the rectangle, but others, illustrated here, are also frequently used.





There are a few additional technical words that are used with reference to the basic shape of a building:

bay
a regularly repeated visual division of a façade

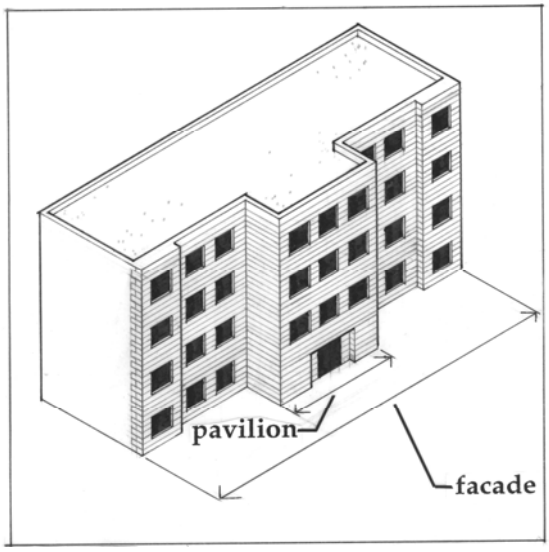
façade
the exterior face or presentable front of a building

pavilion
a part of a façade given prominence because it projects out from the façade

proportion
the relationship between individual elements of a building (such as windows and doors) and their size within the whole building

rhythm
a regularly repeating sequence or pattern

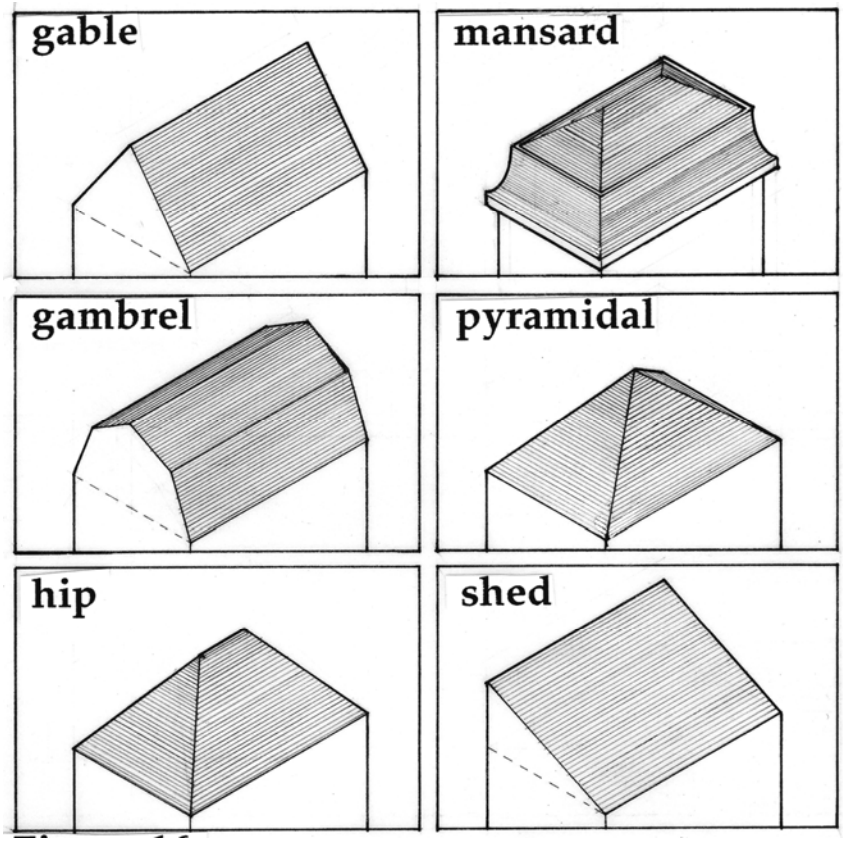
storey
the habitable space between a floor and a ceiling, floor or roof above



Roof Shapes

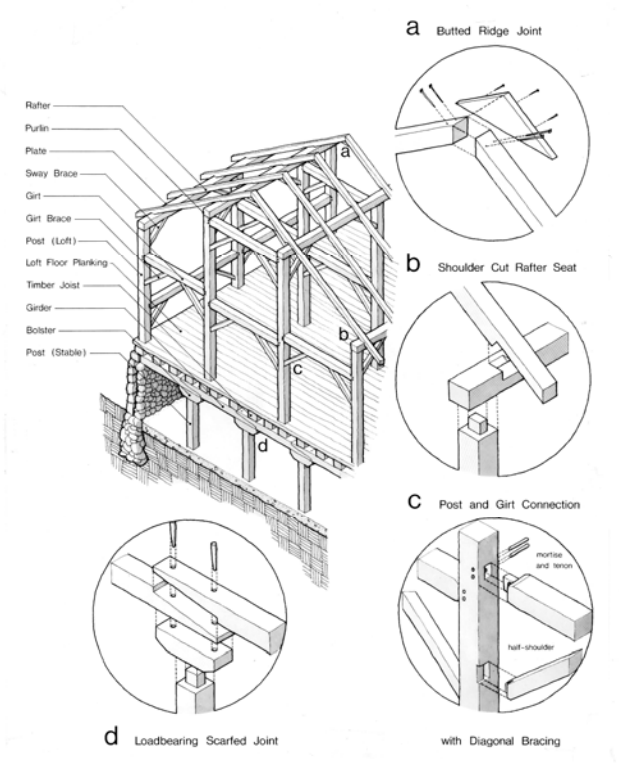
The structural imperative of a roof is to protect the interior and to efficiently shed water and snow. This can be accomplished with a number of shapes, which have been exploited throughout history by building designers. The most common shape is the gable, which can be steep or shallow in its slope. Some other common shapes are noted at right and illustrated below.

gable
mansard
gambrel
pyramidal
hipped
shed



Building Materials and Construction Techniques

This subject is also addressed in *Historic Materials and Construction Techniques*, where basic definitions of materials and construction techniques are explained. There are, however, some technical terms associated with this subject that need further clarification.

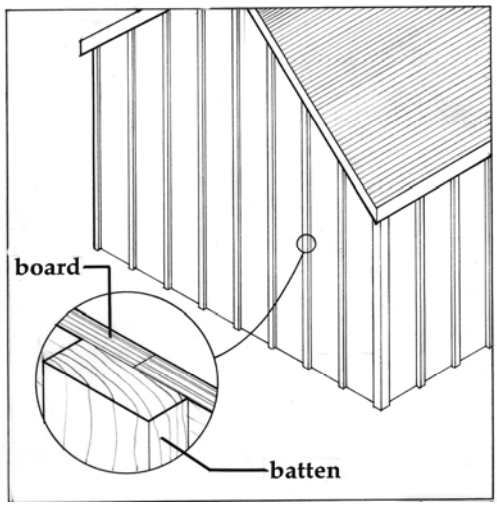


Heavy Timber Frame Construction

bent
a prefabricated network of large posts and beams (*right*)

board and batten
wide vertical wood sheathing (boards) with narrow vertical wood strips (battens) covering the joints between the boards (*below*)

peg
a pin or dowel, slightly tapered, used to join two parts together



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Light Wood Frame Construction

joists
a series of horizontal members used to support floors or ceilings

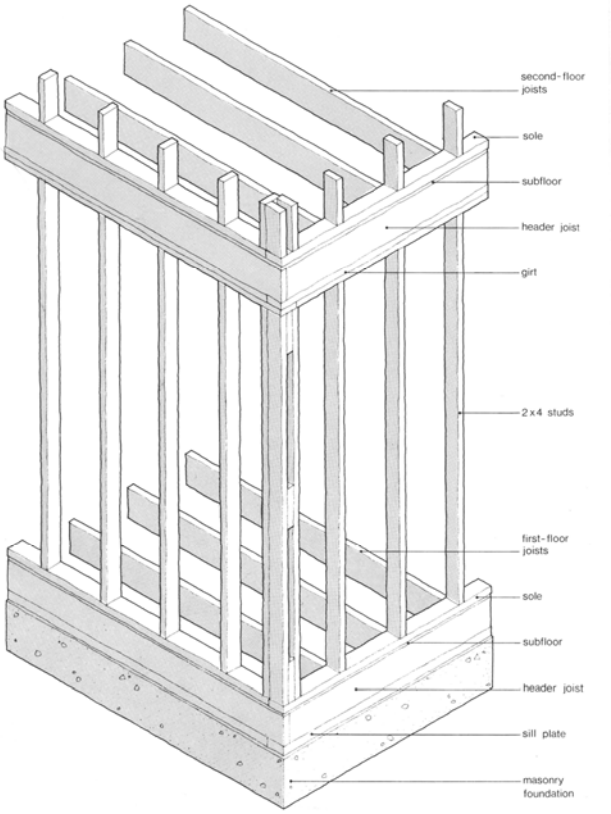
plate
a member laid horizontally to accept the ends of joists or studs

purlins
horizontal structural members that run perpendicularly across the top edges of other roof members

rafter
a structural roof member that slopes up from the wall to the peak of a roof

studs
a series of vertical members used to support wall sheathing

sheathing
the exterior cladding of a building



Brick Construction

bonds
an arrangement of masonry units (brick or concrete block) to provide structural strength and visual appeal; common bonds are called header, stretcher, English or Flemish (illustrated at right)

mortar
a mixture of cement and lime with sand and water used as a bonding agent between masonry units

repointing
to repair the joints in masonry construction with the addition of new mortar

Stone Construction

ashlar
hewn stone blocks with straight-cut edges

coursing
a continuous layer of material, a row

fieldstone
building stone collected from a field

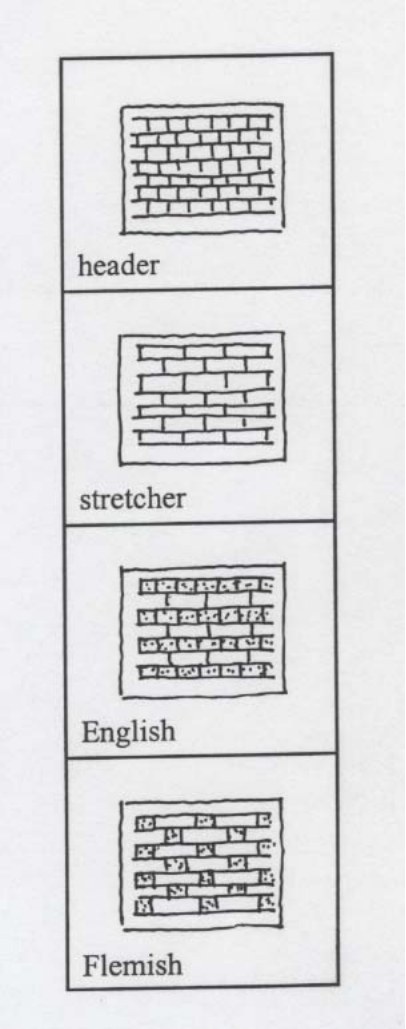
finish
the surface texture; common finishes are rock-faced, rusticated and vermiculated

rustication
stonework emphasized by roughly cut block faces

rubble
construction with fragments of broken stone

vermiculated
ornamentation in stone created with winding, wavy lines, as if caused by worms

Below: Types of typical brick bonds. The type of bond affects the ultimate appearance of the wall.

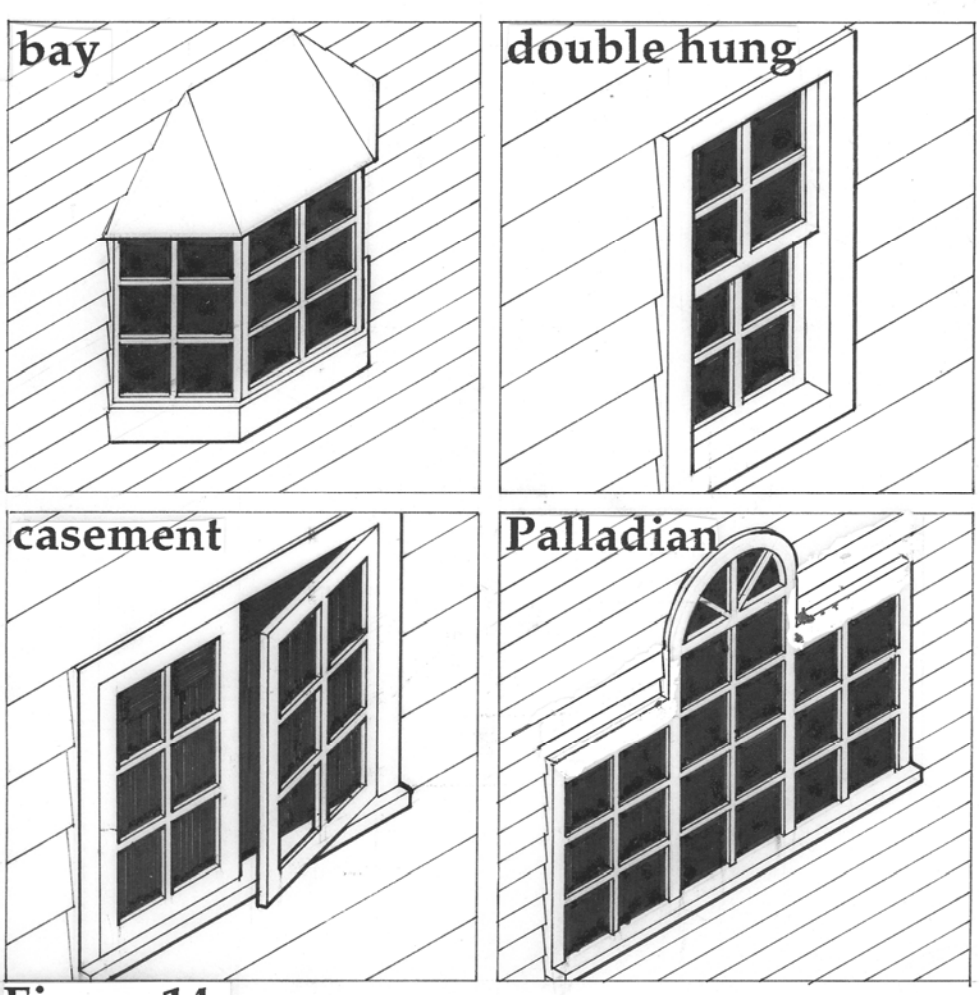


Windows and Doors

The openings in the walls of a building—the windows and the doors—are the source of great attention in a design. (The technical name for the placement of openings in the walls of a building is *fenestration*, from the French, "fenêtre," meaning window). The placement and the detail work that comprises windows and doors can be the source of great attention.

Window Types

bay
double hung
casement
Palladian



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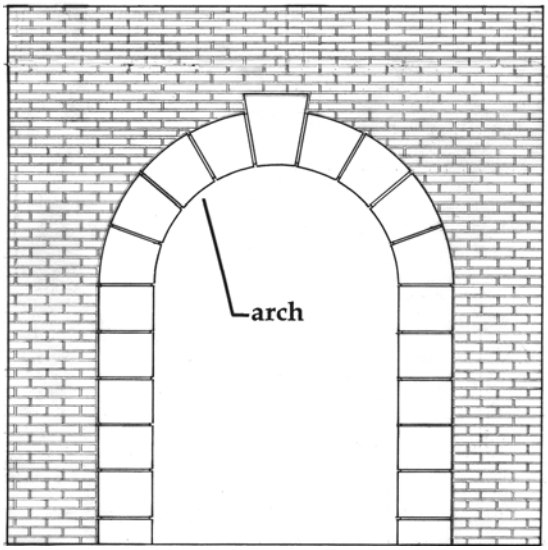
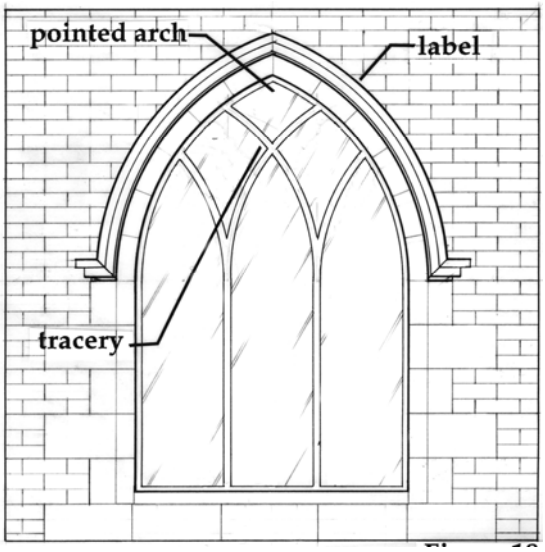
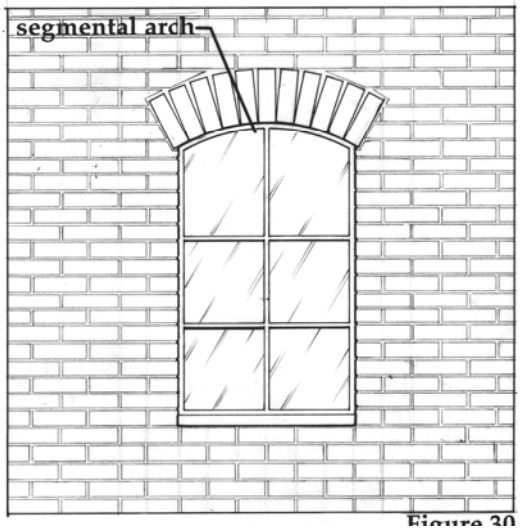
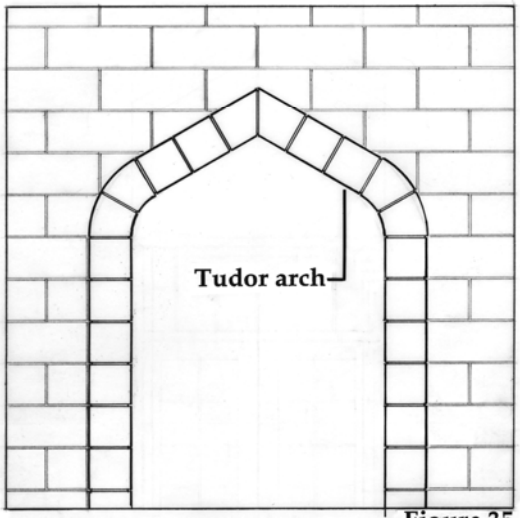
Shapes of Openings

round arch (below left)
pointed arch (bottom left)
flat top
segmental arch (right)
triangular
Tudor arch (below right)









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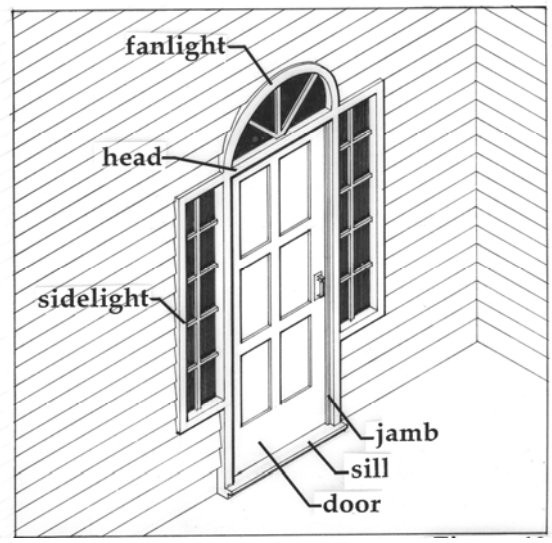
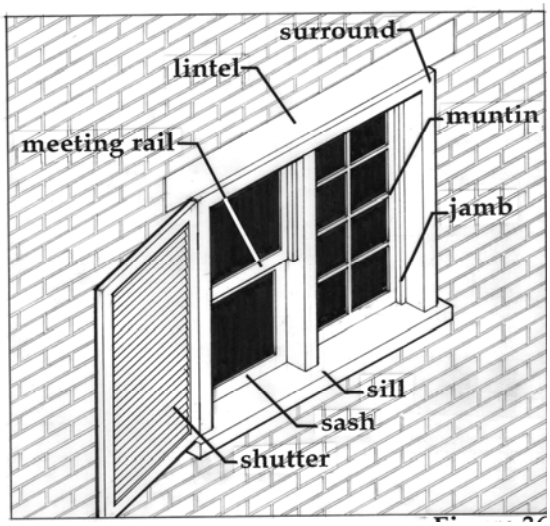
Parts of Windows and Doors

fanlight
a semi-circular window over a door with radiating bars (or muntins) resembling a fan (refer to drawing of a door, top)
head
the top of a window or door opening (door drawing)
jamb
the vertical member on each side of a window or door opening (both drawings)
label
a moulding that runs across the top and part-way down the sides of a window or door opening (see pointed arch drawing)
lintel
a horizontal beam over a window or door opening that carries the weight of the wall above the opening bottom drawing (refer to the window drawing, bottom)
mullion
a vertical member between adjacent window sashes or between windows and doors (window drawing)
muntin
a small member that supports several pieces of glass within a sash (window drawing)
sash
the framework that holds a piece of glass (window drawing)
shutter
hinged panels used to cover window openings (window drawing)
sidelights
windows located at the sides of doors (door drawing)
sill
the horizontal piece forming the bottom of a window or door opening (both drawings)
surround
trim around a window or door opening
tracery
a pattern of interlocking muntins in the upper part of a Gothic pointed window (see pointed arch drawing, page 5)
transom light
a window located above a door (door drawing)





Elements and Details

The elements and details that either are part of a building's structure (like the parts of a window) or are applied to it (like cresting or brackets) are often what creates visual delight. The following list of words is only a brief catalogue of the hundreds of technical terms that have been developed over centuries to describe the many and marvellous details of a building.

arch
a curved structure spanning across the top of an opening in a vertical surface (such as a wall)

balcony
a structural platform extending from the wall of a building and enclosed with a balustrade; supported from below or cantilevered from a supporting wall

baluster/balustrade
balusters are upright posts or spindles that support a handrail/a balustrade is a series of balusters under a handrail

bargeboard
a board, often decorative, covering the projecting edge of a gable roof

belt course
a slender, horizontal band that projects from an exterior wall often at window sill or interior floor levels

bracket
an angular support for a horizontal element that projects from a wall

buttress
a vertical structural member resembling a massive post built against an exterior wall

capital
the decorative feature at the top of a column or pilaster

column
an upright post, usually a tapered cylinder, used for support or decoration; in classical architecture a column consists of a base, shaft and capital

corbel
a masonry unit or series of masonry units that progressively step out from a supporting wall or column

corbel table
a projecting line of masonry or belt courses supported by corbels

cornice
a horizontal, projecting decorative moulding along the top of a wall or building, or the top portion of an entablature

crenellation
a series of square indentations in a parapet giving a castle-like appearance

cresting
ornamental ridge, like a miniature fence, along the top of a roof

cupola
a small domed structure on top of a roof or larger dome

dentils
band of small, tooth-like blocks usually used in Classical architecture

dome
a roof structure in the shape of a portion of a sphere

dormer
a roofed projection from a sloping roof often with a window

eaves
the part of a sloping roof that overhangs a wall

entablature
the upper horizontal part of a Classical order, consisting of the cornice, frieze and architrave; similar to a beam

gable
the triangular upper portion of a wall formed by the slopes of a pitched roof

half-timbering
a method of construction where the spaces in a timber-frame wall are filled with rubble or brickwork

finial
an ornament at the top of a roof gable, spire or other architectural feature

frieze
the central band in a classical entablature above the architrave and below the cornice; or often a decorative band running under the cornice of an interior or exterior wall

keystone
the central uppermost member of an arch

massing
the organization of three-dimensional volumes or spaces into a coherent composition

moulding
a decorative element that defines edges, joints or surfaces through the use of a continuous profile

parapet
the portion of an exterior wall that projects above the edge of a roof area

pediment
in classical architecture, the triangular end of a low-pitched gable; a triangular element used over doors and windows

pendant
an ornamental feature that hangs down from a supporting structure or architectural feature

pier
a massive vertical support of masonry, placed under columns, arches or walls to support a concentration of loads

pilaster
a shallow pier or post, often decorative, projecting slightly from the surface of a wall; resembles a square post attached to a wall

pinnacle
a small vertical ornament with a spire-like pyramidal or conical shape, usually used to crown buttresses or the corners of parapets and towers

pitch
the angle at which a roof slopes from its peak to its eaves

porch
a structure projecting from a building and located in front of an entrance; usually roofed, often open-sided and occasionally supporting a balcony above

portico
an open-sided porch with a column-supported roof

quoins
stones or bricks used to decoratively emphasize the outside corners of a building

shingles
wood or asphalt tiles for covering roofs and walls

spindle
lathe-turned wood elements, often used as balusters and porch decoration

spire
a tall, narrow, steep roof structure ending in a point, rising from a tower or roof peak

terra cotta
fired clay cast in moulds, often used for decorative elements or to clad a building exterior

tower
a building, either freestanding or attached as a prominent element of another building, of great height compared to its floor area; a slender, tall structure usually rising above the building to which it is attached

turret
a small, slender tower characteristically projecting from the corner of a building

vault
a roof or ceiling structure over an area that is based on the form of an arch

verandah
a roofed porch or balcony attached to the elevation of a building

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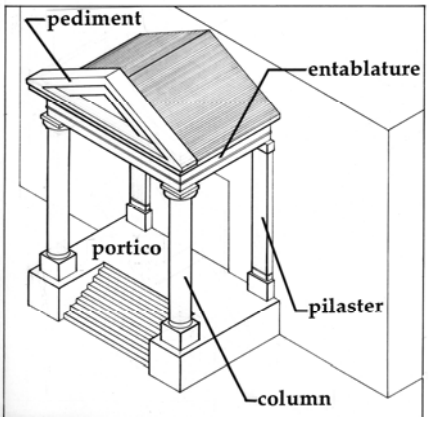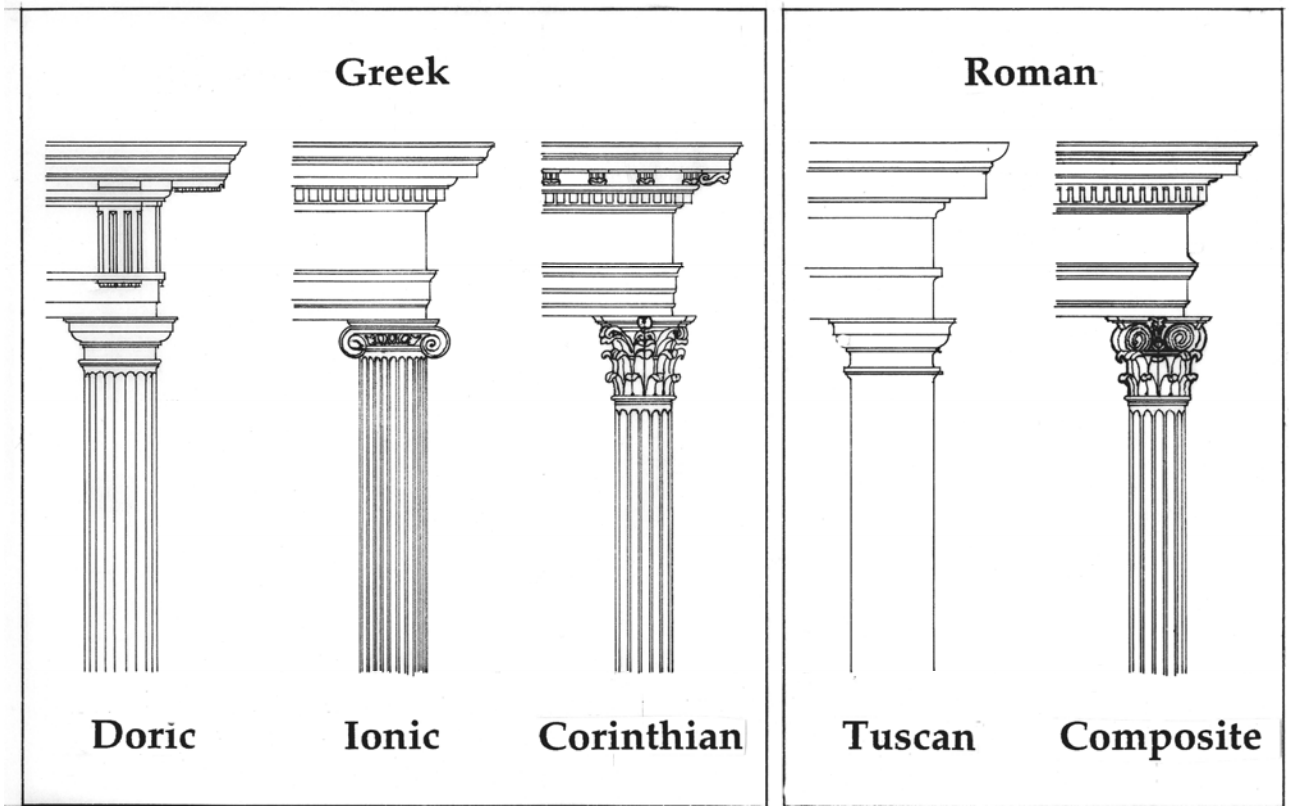
Classical Greek and Roman architecture is defined by a great many technical terms, only a few of which are noted here.