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**Architecture: Exploring Dan Brown’s Novels**

Fact, fiction, and architecture – the holy trinity of Dan Brown’s novels. Since the beginning of Dan Brown’s series, Robert Langdon has raced across the globe to uncover endless secrets. With each new destination, architectural masterpieces shape the background, rooting Brown’s fictional stories in accurate historical precedent. *Angels and Demons[[1]](#endnote-1)* took the reader to the Pantheon and the Vatican, *The DaVinci Code[[2]](#endnote-2)* to the Louvre and Westminster Abbey, *The Lost Symbol[[3]](#endnote-3)* to the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument, *Inferno[[4]](#endnote-4)* to the Hagia Sophia, and now *Origin[[5]](#endnote-5)*, taking one through the Guggenheim in Bilbao and Sagrada Família. Despite nearly two decades having passed since the publication of Langdon’s first adventure, *Angels and Demons*, Brown continues to hold accurate architectural descriptions at the heart of each novel, using it to blend fiction with fact. Readers, not knowing what to believe, begin taking the fiction for fact, spurring renewed interest with every new location Langdon visits. Nonetheless, the 17-year span of the Langdon series has brought with it a new generation – a generation that has grown up in a less religious, technologically diverse world. While Brown’s reference of architecture has not stopped, it has changed to accommodate this new audience. *Angels and Demons* and *The DaVinci Code* saw exclusively Western European Christian architecture, while *The Lost Symbol* branched out to the United States, but remained rooted in a Christian background. With the onset of the current decade, *Inferno* brought an exploration of the Islamic tones in the Hagia Sophia, and *Origin* took it one step farther, including a non-denominational architecture – that of technology. The change in architecture has not diluted its ultimate purpose to blend fact and fiction, but rather served as a transition from the traditional to modern, a crossroads at which Langdon often finds himself.

Much like his other novels, *Origin* focuses on progressive and modernist architecture*,* referencing the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao as well as Antoni Gaudi’s works. The purpose of this is twofold: it highlights Kirsch’s progressive thinking, but also shows the intersection, and often conflict, between tradition and modernism. Upon viewing the Guggenheim, Langdon notes that the structure’s “chaotic mass of shapes” and “titanium tiles” “gave the structure a simultaneously organic and extraterrestrial feel, as if some futuristic leviathan had crawled out of the water to sun herself on the riverbank” (O, I, 15). Upon the construction of the Guggenheim Bilbao, the city “went from being a city dominated by industry to a city … entering the 21st century as a first rate European centre of development” (*Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, I, 14)[[6]](#endnote-6). The historical importance of the museum combined with its futuristic architecture mirrors Kirsch’s work. Kirsch hopes that his discovery will throw the world out of the 21st century and into the future, just as the Guggenheim did for Bilbao. In this way, Brown uses architecture to characterize what Kirsch hopes his work will achieve. Despite the positive description of the Guggenheim in the eyes of the reader, Luis Avila sees it as “an undulating mess of perverse forms covered in metal tile – as if two thousand years of architectural progress had been tossed out the window in favor of total chaos” (O, II, 23). Avila’s aversion to the Guggenheim further emphasizes what Kirsch’s presentation will do – put humanity at a crossroads between tradition and the future. In showing contrasting points of view to the Guggenheim’s architecture, Brown effectively personifies the opposition any groundbreaking discovery brings with it. Nonetheless, Brown continues to characterize the museum’s modernist approach in order to show that humanity’s progression ultimately triumphs over those who try to stop it, having Langdon note that “the acoustics [of the atrium] felt foreign,” “like a futuristic cathedral” (O, III, 24). Architecturally, the atrium was designed as “a nexus…from which various extremities of all different shapes and sizes unfold” (*Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, IV, 95). In describing the central architectural aspect as that of a futuristic cathedral, Brown foreshadows the ultimate triumph of Kirsch’s presentation and how it will be the religion of the future, “a nexus” from which new discoveries will “unfold”. However, the parallels between Kirsch and modernist architecture continue beyond the Guggenheim to Spain’s most sacred architect – Antoni Gaudi.

Gaudi, “often described as the progenitor of living architecture and biological design” (O, XLIX, 219) was the creator of Casa Mila, the home of Edmond Kirsch. Brown, in his typical descriptive fashion, tells the reader that Casa Mila was “a dazzlingly original house, whose tiered façade and undulating stone balconies resembled an excavated mountain” (O, XLIX, 220). Not short of fact, the Casa Mila is truly constructed with “stone…[that] undergoes constant mutations…due to the postilions of the sun…that generate a sensation of movement” (*La Pedrera*, III, 39)[[7]](#endnote-7). The organic and original architecture of Kirsch’s house in turn parallels the basic nature of Kirsch’s discovery. Gaudi once said, “Nothing is invented, for it’s written in nature first. Originality consists of returning to the origin.” That is exactly what Kirsch does, causing Langdon to note that “Gaudi was a lot like Edmond…A groundbreaking visionary for whom the normal rules did not apply” (O, XLIX, 219). Once again, Brown uses architecture to characterize Kirsch’s discovery; however, this time he uses the simplicity in the concept behind Casa Mila to mirror the simplicity in Kirsch’s intentions – to find a truth that unites the world. Ultimately, the Casa Mila leads to Gaudi’s most famed work, The Sagrada Familia. Here, Brown capitalizes upon the church’s grandeur and structure to reflect similar aspects in Kirsch’s discovery. For one, the Sagrada Familia was “criticized by traditionalist for its eerie organic shape…but hailed by modernists for its structural fluidity” (O, LXI, 279). To Gaudi, it had one “final mission: the celebration of Christian liturgy,” but also used “undulated organic forms” (*Sagrada Familia*, III, 39)[[8]](#endnote-8) with the church’s “delicate cluster of airy spires…ascend[ing] effortlessly into the Spanish sky” (O, LXI, 279). This complexity demonstrated in the purpose, perception, and construction of the Sagrada Familia bring the architecture of Kirsch’s discovery to an understandable climax. It is a discovery that will be hailed by the new generation and scorned by the religious, but will nonetheless bring together religion and science, just as the Sagrada Familia bridges Christian iconography with natural form. The church’s heaven-pointing spires ultimately point to what Kirsch’s discovery will reveal – the truth behind the heavens. For the reader, Brown’s replete references to modernist architecture serve to characterize Kirsch and his discovery, adding a tangible layer of reality to the fictional story. Simultaneously, Brown takes on descriptions of the architecture of technology, giving the novel a unique spin on his typical style.

To accompany the new generation of technology-savvy readers, Brown stresses the architecture of modern technology in *Origin*, drawing parallels with modern day and highlighting the novelty behind Kirsch. Brown bridges true architecture with technology when he describes the exhibit of “CAD programs and massive 3-D printers” (O, LXXVII, 341) showing the evolution of the Sagrada Familia. CAD, the most commonly used program for computer-generated architectural images directly relates *Origin* to modern day. In a more nuanced fashion, the architecture behind Kirsch’s “Winston” and “E-Wave” reflect new technologies and new ideas. Winston, Kirsch’s personal artificial intelligence assistant, is seemingly capable of anything; however, to keep the reader from viewing *Origin* as a far-fetched science fiction novel, Brown references similar modern day technology: “Winston’s abilities… should come as no surprise considering daily accounts of artificial intelligence performing all kinds of complex tasks, including writing novels – one such book nearly winning a Japanese literary prize” (O, XXXIX, 175) (this reference being completely accurate)[[9]](#endnote-9). As more is revealed about Kirsch, the reader learns of E-Wave, Kirsch’s master computer described as using “superpositions and quantum mechanics [to] create an entirely new breed of machine” (O, XLVII, 210). The architecture of E-Wave is founded off of NASA’s D-Wave[[10]](#endnote-10), a real life computer. Through paralleling the architecture of the technology in *Origin* with modern day inventions, Brown brings his writing to the new generation, allowing them to relate to it. As well as this, the architecture of Kirsch’s E-Wave and Winston both reflect the novelty of Kirsch’s discoveries. Just as D-Wave is currently the computer of the future, Kirsch’s discovery is one that will change the very foundation of humanity. Had Brown only referenced the architecture of buildings, such parallels could not have been drawn as effectively. To complement this, Brown includes many references to the architecture of the online world, connecting with the younger generation of readers.

In the midst of the mystery and action of the novel, frequent interruptions are brought to the reader regarding the architecture of the online web, putting a realistic spin on *Origin*. Prior to Kirsch’s presentation in the Guggenheim, Ambra Vidal notes that the presentation “is fully automated by computers and will be streamed live around the entire world” (O, XIV, 73). Soon after, Edmond resists “the urge to glance skyward” at an oversized television where a “close-up of his own face was being projected…to millions of people” (O, XVII, 85). While not descriptions of the construction of the technology, these excerpts highlight the organization (i.e. the architecture) of the online world and how one can now stream an image across the globe. This accurately reflects the current age, in which the lives of many people are dictated by screens – watching the morning news, checking the weather, etc. Similarly, Brown describes the “World Wide Web,” an “online black market [created] to sell illegal drugs …political secrets, and even professionals for hire” (O, XLIII, 190). Such online black markets exist today due to the presence of Bitcoin, which allows for untraceable payment. In describing the architecture of such websites, Brown manages to make *Origin* all the more realistic. Similar references note the development of phenomena such as hashtags, a way to group content online in hopes of having it gain more attention. The ConspiracyNet.com announcements perfectly mirror the structure behind such concepts, as each announcement comes with its own set of hashtags. Such constructions are readily found online on platforms such as Twitter, where even state officials use them to spread their thoughts and ideas. Ultimately, *Origin* combines Brown’s typical architectural descriptions with a newfound focus on the architecture behind specific technologies and the organization of the online web, bridging his traditional style with one focused on the new generation, just as Kirsch’s discovery is meant to bring together two forces that have opposed each other for centuries – religion and science.

Nearly two decades ago, in 2000, Brown introduced the world to Robert Langdon in *Angels and Demons* through what one now knows as quintessential Brown writing, replete with references to art and architecture. Throughout his novels, Brown references both modern and ancient architecture, bringing fact into the novels’ fiction. The reader begins to believe every historical and scientific reference, making the novels more exhilarating.

In *Angels and* Demons, the true architecture of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) is described, bringing the reader to believe the science that follows. Maximillian Kohler explains that particles moving at full speed will go over “180,000 miles per second” (A&D, XV, 54). According to CERN’s (a real organization), *LHC: The Guide[[11]](#endnote-11)*, particles in the actual LHC “travel very close to the speed of light” (*LHC: The Guide*, I, 4). The information Brown presents on the architecture of the LHC is correct; however, the “pure energy-no mass” (A&D, XVII, 63) antimatter created in the LHC in *Angels and Demons* is fictitious. Awestruck at the profound architecture of CERN’s LHC, the reader begins to take the fiction as fact. Believing that antimatter may be real, one questions its power further exhilarating the reader as a cloak of reality is placed over the fiction.

In similar fashion, Brown references accurate ancient architecture, blurring the line between architectural fact and Illuminati fiction. Langdon, on a mad dash to find the Illuminati’s Path of Illumination, is directed to the “Chigi Chapel (A&D, LXII, 253) – a chapel adorned with “two ten-foot high marble pyramids” on either side (A&D, LXV, 268). A Google image[[12]](#endnote-12) of the Chigi Chapel confirms Brown’s description; however, the Chigi Chapel is not the first step on the fictitious Path of Illumination. Most readers know when to start believing Brown, but not when to stop. One begins to think: if Brown initiates with fact, why should he switch to fiction? The reader begins to fantasize about what the world once was and is swooped into Langdon’s chase, multiplying the novel’s suspense. The same goes for the portrayal of architecture in the film adaptation[[13]](#endnote-13) of *Angels and Demons*, with all locations being portrayed accurately, causing a similar dilemma to arise in the viewer as in the books. Having worked well in his first novel, Brown continues this style of blending fact and fiction in *The DaVinci Code.*

Upon entry into the Louvre, Langdon notes that the glass pyramid above was made using 666 glass panes, a number associated with devil worship (DVC, IV, 26). This statement regarding the 666 panes of glass has blurred reality. While false, Dominique Stezepfandt’s book *François Mitterrand, Grand Architecte de l’Univers[[14]](#endnote-14)* spread the message that the pyramid was built with exactly 666 panes. Not sure whether to trust Brown or not, the reader begins to find the book all the more suspenseful. [[15]](#footnote-1)

Similarly, Brown’s description of the Temple Church’s architecture further emphasizes the novel’s continued references to the Priory of Sion. Upon reaching Temple Church, Langdon notes the building’s circular structure. Considering that the Priory of Sion was “*the* pagan goddess worship cult” (DVC, XXIII, 148), Brown’s inclusion of the pagan symbolism (i.e. the circle) in the Temple Church’s true architecture bridges the gap between fact and fiction. The reader starts to further believe the backstory to the Priory of Sion and is immersed into the novel. In the film adaptation[[16]](#endnote-15), all of the locations are also accurately described, bringing about the same sense of confusion, but with it interest, in the viewer.

In his third adventure, *The Lost Symbol*, Langdon remains close to home, but Brown’s use of architecture does not change. As Professor Thomas R. Beyer states, “the U.S Capitol dominates *The Lost Symbol*” (*33 Keys to Unlocking* The Lost Symbol*,* XIV, 78). The references to the main architecture of the Capitol are accurate, just as all of Brown’s architectural references have been in the past; however, areas such as “The Chamber of Reflection” are fictitious, according to Beyer (*33 Keys to Unlocking* The Lost Symbol*,* XIV, 79). The reader, knowing that the Rotunda is real, unknowingly assumes that all other architectural references are accurate as well, giving the novel an aura of a mystery-documentary more so than a fictitious story.

Nonetheless, the architectural references of *The Lost Symbol* are all but new. Pyramids appeared in the Chigi Chapel of *Angels and Demons* and at the Louvre in *The DaVinci Code,* obelisks throughout the Path of Illumination and now again in places like the Washington Monument (*33 Keys to Unlocking* The Lost Symbol, XV, 83). The reader is left with a riveting mystery, but one that follows a traditional Dan Brown plot line, especially in terms of architecture and Christian iconography.

Brown’s first three novels heavily rely on Christianity, spending no time on the other religions of the world. However, in *Inferno*, Langdon travels to the Hagia Sophia, a Christian and Islamic architectural masterpiece. The blend of architecture diversifies Langdon’s adventures, making *Inferno* Brown’s first step away from the norm.

As Langdon flies into Istanbul, Brown describes Hagia Sophia’s history, explaining how it “had served as an Eastern Orthodox cathedral until 1204,” then a “Catholic church” and later “in the fifteenth century…a mosque” (I, LXXXIV, 376). By using distinct architectural images (e.g. catholic church versus mosque) to flow smoothly into a historically accurate description of the Hagia Sophia’s history, Brown slowly introduces Islam into his novels. Readers, accustomed to Christian locations of past Langdon adventures, take this transition gratefully, as it presents the first major divergence from Christianity in the Langdon series.

Brown continues to elaborate this transition through the Hagia Sophia’s internal architecture, mentioning the “*mihrab* – the semicircular niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca” (I, LXXXVIII, 395) and the Byzantine floor plan characteristic of the late Christian Roman Empire (Robart 1)[[17]](#endnote-16). The depictions of both religions in the Hagia Sophia take the reader beyond the typical Brown descriptions of Christian architecture. This awakens the reader, as the diversification of architecture referenced diversifies the series. This trend continues in *Origin*, as leaders from Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Science all play vital roles in the plot. As with the other film adaptations, the *Inferno* movie[[18]](#endnote-17) accurately depicts the architecture described in the book, bringing a similar novelty to the movie that was lacking in the prior two adaptations.

Ultimately, the accuracy of the architectural references allows the novels and films to draw in their audiences. The constant architectural references put one at odds with what to believe and what to imagine. One is left, at the very least, to admire the architecture present and to question the rest.

*Origin* is no exception to Brown’s desire to blur fiction using architectural fact; however, since the publication of *Angels and Demons*, nearly two decades have passed. With this, a new generation of readers have picked up Brown’s books – a generation that has grown up surrounded by iPhones, not art, surrounded by machinery, not architecture. References to ancient architectural feats no longer spur the same interest as a reference to artificial intelligence might. In response to this, Dan Brown has ultimately changed his style of writing in order to accommodate the desires of the new generation. Mention of Uber, hashtags, Instagram, CNN, Google, IBM, and more litter *Origin*, while true architectural works are limited to the Guggenheim, Casa Mila, and Sagrada Familia. Brown has not forgotten the role architecture played in his earlier novels, so he uses the architecture of technology to replace the architecture of the world’s great churches and museums. Ironically, Brown includes a heavy technological element to *Origin* to make it Langdon’s most revolutionary adventure yet, but ends up detracting from the novel’s complexity, as the technology he creates is similar to present day inventions, but still futuristic. In his other novels, no architectural fact or fiction was unattainable, making the novels genuine and beautiful. Despite the awes of modern technology, one is left to see that where it prevails in practicality, it fails in the hidden beauty and complexity that works such as the Pantheon, Rosslyn Chapel, U.S. Capitol, Hagia Sophia, and Sagrada Familia have.

1. Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons*. (Pocket Star Books, 2000) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code.* (Anchor Books, 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dan Brown, *The Lost Symbol*. (Anchor Books, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dan Brown, *Inferno.* (Doubleday, 2013) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dan Brown, *Origin.* (Doubleday, 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Visual Guides Great Works, *Visual Guide to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*. (Dos de Arte Ediciones, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Visual Guides Great Works, *La Pedrera*. (Dos de Arte Ediciones, 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Visual Guides Great Works, *The Basilica of the Sagrada Familia*. (Dos de Arte Ediciones, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. digitaltrends.com, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/cool-tech/japanese-ai-writes-novel-passes-first-round-nationanl-literary-prize/> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. D-Wave, <https://www.dwavesys.com/home> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. LHC: The Guide, <http://cds.cern.ch/record/2255762/files/CERN-Brochure-2017-002-Eng.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. View of the Chigi Chapel, <https://www.wga.hu/html_m/r/raphael/5roma/2/09chigi1.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ron Howard, *Angels and Demons*. (Columbia Pictures, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 666 panes of glass, and the actual controversy of the Louvre Pyramid, <http://onelifetours.ca/666-panes-of-glass-and-the-actual-controversy-of-the-louvre-pyramid/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
16. Ron Howard, *The DaVinci Code*. (Columbia Pictures, 2006) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. The Key to Dan Brown’s Inferno, <http://sites.middlebury.edu/thekeystodanbrownsinferno/chapter-88/> [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. Ron Howard, *Inferno*. (Columbia Pictures, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)