Architecture and the Urban Environment

When Egypt had secured military and political security and vast agricultural and mineral wealth, its architecture flourished.

![Architecture and the Urban Environment](Image)

Figure 1:
A view of Buhen from the north.

Buhen was an ancient fort built by Senusret III during his multiple campaigns. Its moat, drawbridges and bastions would have provided good defense against enemy attacks.

- The reign of Amenemhat III is especially known for its exploitation of resources, in which mining camps were operated on a semi-permanent basis.
- Ancient Egyptian architects used sun-dried bricks, fine sandstone, limestone and granite for their building purposes, though typically reserved stone for temples and tombs.
- Hieroglyphic and pictorial carvings in brilliant colors were abundantly used to decorate Egyptian structures.
- Workers’ villages, such as Kahun, were often built nearby to pyramid construction sites to house workers and slaves.
- Senusret III is known for his construction of massive forts to defend the region after his many military campaigns.
- The White Chapel, built by Senusret I as part of the Karnak temple complex, is one of the finest works of architecture of its time.

Note:

A **hieroglyph** is an element of an Egyptian writing system.
Figure 2:
The White Chapel

The White Chapel of Senusret I at Karnak is a good example of the fine quality of art and architecture produced during the 12th Dynasty. Its columns hold reliefs of a very high quality which are hardly seen elsewhere at Karnak.
As the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom restored the country’s prosperity and stability, there was a resurgence of building projects. When Egypt had secured military and political security and vast agricultural and mineral wealth, its architecture flourished. Grand tombs in the form of pyramids continued to be built throughout the Middle Kingdom, along with villages, cities and forts. The reign of Amenemhat III is especially known for its exploitation of resources, in which mining camps—previously only used by intermittent expeditions—were operated on a semi-permanent basis. A vast labor force of Canaanite settlers from the Near East aided in mining and building campaigns.

Ancient Egyptian architects used sun-dried bricks, fine sandstone, limestone and granite for their building purposes. As in the Old Kingdom, stone was most often reserved for tombs and temples, while bricks were used for palaces, fortresses, everyday houses and town walls. Mud would be collected from the nearby Nile River, placed in molds and left to dry and harden in the hot sun until they formed bricks for construction. Architects carefully planned all their work, fitting their stones and bricks precisely together. Hieroglyphic and pictorial carvings in brilliant colors were abundantly used to decorate Egyptian structures, and motifs such as the scarab, sacred beetle, the solar disk, and the vulture were common.

Workers’ villages were often built nearby to pyramid construction sites. *Kahun*, for example, is a village that was associated with the pyramid of Senusret II. The town was laid out in a regular plan, with mud-brick town walls on three sides. No evidence was found of a fourth wall, which may have collapsed and been washed away during the annual inundation. The town was rectangular in shape and was divided internally by a mudbrick wall as large and strong as the exterior walls. This wall divided about one third of the area of the town and in this smaller area the houses consisted of rows of back-to-back, side-by-side single room houses. The larger area, which was higher up the slope and thus benefited from whatever breeze was blowing, contained a much smaller number of large, multi-room villas, indicating perhaps a class separation between workers (or slaves) and overseers. A major feature of the town was the so-called “acropolis” building; its column bases suggest its importance.

Senusret III was a warrior-king who helped the Middle Kingdom reach its height of prosperity. In his sixth year, he re-dredged an Old Kingdom canal around the first cataract to facilitate travel to upper Nubia, using this to launch a series of brutal campaigns. After his victories, Senusret III built a series of *massive forts* throughout the country to establish the formal boundary between Egyptian conquests and unconquered Nubia. *Buhen* was the northernmost of a line of forts within signalling distance of one another. The fortress itself extended more than 150 meters along the West bank of the Nile, covering 13,000 square meters, and had within its wall a small town laid out in a grid system. At its peak it probably had a population of around 3500 people. The fortress also included the administration for the whole fortified region. Its fortifications included a moat three meters deep, drawbridges, bastions, buttresses, ramparts,
battlements, loopholes, and a catapult. The walls of the fort were about five meters thick and ten meters high (Figure 0).

_The Karnak Temple Complex_ is an example of fine architecture that was begun during the Middle Kingdom, and continued through the Ptolemaic period. Built by Senusret I, it comprised a vast mix of temples, chapels, pylons, and other buildings. The _White Chapel_, also referred to as the Jubilee Chapel, is one of the finest examples of architecture during this time. Its columns were intricately decorated with reliefs of a very high quality Figure 1 Later in the New Kingdom the Chapel was demolished; however the dismantled pieces were discovered in the 1920’s and carefully assembled into the building that is seen today.