A strikingly original, beautifully narrated history of Western architecture and the cultural transformations that it represents. Concrete, marble, steel, brick: little else made by human hands seems as stable, as immutable, as a building. Yet the life of any structure is neither fixed nor timeless. Outliving their original contexts and purposes, buildings are forced to adapt to each succeeding age. To survive, they must become shape-shifters. In an inspired refashioning of architectural history, Edward Hollis recounts more than a dozen stories of such metamorphosis, highlighting the way in which even the most familiar structures all change over time into "something rich and strange." The Parthenon, that epitome of a ruined temple, was for centuries a working church and then a mosque; the cathedral of Notre Dame was "restored" to a design that none of its original makers would have recognized. Remains of the Berlin Wall, meanwhile, which was once gleefully smashed and bulldozed, are now treated as precious relics. Altered layer by layer with each generation, buildings become eloquent chroniclers of the civilizations they've witnessed. Their stories, as beguiling and captivating as folktales, span the gulf of history.

My Personal Review:
We were touring a castle in England years ago, and came to the banqueting hall. "This hall has been remodeled many times," the sign in the room said, "the last time in 1654." It was a reminder of how old old buildings in the Old World really are, and a cause for doubt: can it be that this room looked just the same as it did over 300 years ago? I thought of that sign many times as I was reading _The Secret Lives of Buildings: From the Ruins of the Parthenon to the Vegas Strip in Thirteen Stories_ (Metropolitan Books) by Edward Hollis. The author is an architect and teacher who has specialized in alterations to historic buildings. Hollis says that "architecture is all too often imagined as if buildings do not--and should not--change." An emblem of this idea is included here, "The Architect's Dream," a painting from 1840 by Thomas Cole, which shows an impossibly rich array of buildings all together, from pyramids to a gothic spire, each of them looking as new as if they had been built yesterday. A dream, indeed, a complete fantasy; an architect might design a building...
with initial perfection, but buildings do change. "... the fact that all great buildings mutate over time is often treated as something of a dirty secret, or at best a source of melancholic reflection." Hollis argues otherwise. If we insist that pristine buildings are the only ones that count, we eliminate examples of architecture that are important, and not just the ancient ones. His book includes some famous buildings, some infamous ones, and some not buildings at all. The eccentric choices and sometimes whimsical narratives belie that this is a serious book of architectural appreciation.

It is good to start with that icon of the ancient world, the Parthenon. It was built as a home for the gods, but served many more centuries as a Christian church, first Roman and then Orthodox. Then it was a mosque. Then it became a magazine for ammunition; in all these versions, it was remodeled and changed to suit each new use. When the ammunition blew up, it became an unusable ruin, the pieces of which we see on the Acropolis hilltop today. Hollis maintains, however, it is not even the ruin from the old days. It has been subsequently ruined by depredation, with fragments dispersed not just as the famous Elgin Marbles to London, but also to the Vatican, to Vienna, and who knows where else. Hollis begins many of his chapters with "Once upon a time," calling upon legends and stories to help examine the meaning of the bricks and mortar. This is most fitting in the flitting of the Holy House of Loreto, which, like the Parthenon, is better as an idea than as a real building. The house was the very building where an angel flew in through the window to tell Mary that she was going to be having the baby Jesus. The house became a shrine within a church, and then it disappeared and flitted away to Europe, and attracted a mass of people including thieves, so it flitted to a meadow, and when those responsible for it fought over the profits it could give them, it flitted to a hill, and so on. For me, the most interesting of the chapters was about Notre Dame de Paris, one of the most-visited cathedrals in the world. If you have been, you have been impressed by the medieval gloom of the building. Victor Hugo's novel about the cathedral's hunchback came out in 1831, and was a sensation. People wanted to see the dark and Gothic old place where Quasimodo hung out. They could not. The cathedral had "enlightened" during the Revolution, with transparent windows taking the place of the pictorial colorful but dark ones, and the interior had been coated with multicolored marble, resembling "nothing so much as a gilded salon at Versailles or a scene at the opera." What you see now isn't actually medieval, but a nineteenth century imagining of what medieval ought to be.

There is a chapter about another reimagining, that of the Venice imported to Vegas (and now to China) as a gambling environment. There is a chapter here on what happened to the Berlin Wall, both the traces of it upon the city and the chunks of it that were processed to be sold to lovers of freedom (and knickknacks) the world over. A fascinating chapter gives the story of the Hulme Crescents in Manchester, a utopian housing plan that turned out to be doomed futurism. Hollis can tell a story well, adapting each chapter's style to the construction involved. For all its quirkiness and
often heartfelt subjectivity, the book is bound to impress any reader with its marshalling of facts on each building and with the lively way Hollis has described the often bizarre ways people and natural forces have changed the buildings, sometimes beyond recognition.

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