Of all the trans-cultural characteristics common to the great world traditions, the association of architecture with the human body is one of the most vastly disseminated. The Vastu tradition of India, Chinese Feng Shui, Egyptian Temple architecture, the Inca Seque system, and the Greek canon of proportions have one thing in common: a reverence for architectural space as a reflection of the human body.

The Inca, for example, patterned their entire kingdom on the idea that Cuzco, the ancient capital of that enormous empire, was the umbilical center of a giant body of land. The word Cuzco literally means belly button. From this center at the heart of the empire, 41 rays of energy, known as seques, radiated to all points of the empire, connecting lands as far as modern-day Colombia and Chile to the temple of the Sun, the Korichancha, at the very center of this body made of earth. The Inca believed that the cosmic energies necessary for human life streamed into the dimensions of space and time through this umbilicus. Through this connection, the forces of Heaven (the Hanakpacha or Upper World) and Earth (the Ujupacha or Lower World) were harmonized and balanced in the realm of humanity (the Kaypacha or Middle World).

The Vastu tradition of India echoes the centrality of the Inca ideal. According to Vastu theory, architectural space is inhabited by a mythical creature, the Vastu Purusha, who was said to be created from the sweat of the God Shiva during a titanic struggle with demons. The body of Purusha fills the building space completely, with its head in the northeast and its feet in the southwest. The center of the building, which corresponds to the Purusha’s navel, is an area that must be left open in order to allow for the entry of cosmic energies. Also know as Brahma Stan, this central area is the residence of Brahma, the god of creation. The center of the structure is seen as the entry point for reality and the manifest world.
In ancient Greece, the idea of an umbilicus in physical space can be seen in the omphalos discovered in the ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. This carved stone was meant to represent the navel of the world, and on its surface are patterned the rays of energy that correspond to the terrestrial magnetic grid. The location of this temple, and the cave to which it was related, refer to the central position of the mountain as a symbol of the axis mundi, or cosmic pillar around which ordinary life revolved, as the great drama of space and time churned forth the experiences of humans.

In Chinese feng shui the centrality of space is acknowledged in the concept of the Tai Chi, the “great ultimate”, a location without dimensions at the heart of a structure through which cosmic energy is understood to stream into the realm of manifest reality. Also known as the “central ridge beam”, to signify its importance as support of all of existence, the Tai Chi is the place where reality and the Void of non-existence connect. This transfer of vital energy or chi is what animates all of consciousness and brings life to the inanimate. The movement of chi in and around a structure is compared to the movement of energy in the human body. The main entry of a building, for example, is often called the “mouth of chi” to signify the qualities of chi that are necessary to promote prosperity, health, and longevity for the structure’s inhabitants.

Each area or sector of a building is also understood in feng shui to have a direct correlation to a body part, organ system, or metabolic function. The center of a building’s front area, for example, is associated with the element of water, and with all bodily functions involving fluids. The bladder and kidneys, as well as the reproductive system, are therefore correlated to this area. Conversely, the heart or lungs would correlate to the area located at the center rear of the space, an area associated with the element of fire.
The idea of space as a mirror of the human body also includes allusions to the proportions and distributions of parts within the structure. The Egyptian temples of antiquity, for example, were designed to reflect an ideal proportion as exemplified in the body of the Pharaoh, the human incarnation of the divine realm. By patterning the building’s design to the divine proportions of the emperor’s body, the sacredness of the space was thereby enhanced. As the temple grew in size, the size and scale of its component parts were made to retain their proportionality to the canon derived from the divine body of the ruler. This is can also be seen in the proportional system of the Gothic Cathedral, which was often seen as a reflection not only of the divine body of Christ, the earthly son of God, but also as a reflection of the numbers and ratios which the platonic system allocated to the divine order inherent in the physical world. The English unit of measurement, the foot, is a late allusion to this idea.

This ideal was carried into the Renaissance, and is part of the canon of proportions which Leonardo and Michelangelo, among many others, used to design and proportion buildings, paintings, and sculpture. Collectively known as the anthropocosmos, the western ideal of patterning images and spaces on the divinely proportioned dimensions of the human body is at the very foundation of both Classicism and the Neoclassical revival that culminated at the end of the 19th century. It behooves us to understand that many of the state capitols or regional banks which grace the village squares of so many American cities, are patterned along these lines, and that in its proportions and dimensions each of these structures reflects not only the cultural peculiarities of their times, but also a much more eternal allusion to the human body as the source for divinely inspired space.