

*Preface: Architectural Theory Is Everybody's
Business*

A theory of architecture resides in any notion of what a building ought to be like. The form a building takes presupposes a theory of design. The way its members are assembled presupposes a theory of structure. And the procedure followed to arrive at the design presupposes a theory of design method. This is true for structures as simple as log cabins or elaborate as palaces. In the case of vernacular buildings, theory is exercised through rote procedure rather than premeditation, but it is there nevertheless. In the case of ambitious buildings, where deliberate design choices are made at every turn—whether for the sake of structure, function, or design—the purposeful application of theory is inescapable. Even a person standing on the sidelines who articulates an opinion is necessarily taking a theoretical position. So it is, then, that architectural theory is both the property and the concern of all who build and all who evaluate buildings, either as observers or as users.

The working boundaries of architectural theory have been more tightly defined through formal treatises, written by a variety of interested professionals and laymen, as guides for both architects and patrons. Although some of the most famous and important examples have been

primarily addressed to patrons and cultivated lay readers rather than to architects, all the treatises are relevant to professional practitioners. Indeed, theorists from Vitruvius on have asserted that an effectual architect needs to be equipped with a fluent knowledge of theory as well as practice. They have maintained that whereas knowledge of theory alone results in impotence to fulfill a building project, knowledge of practice alone limits one to the skills of a craftsman. So, if expertise in practice makes it possible to translate ideas into reality, it is theory that provides the conceptual awareness needed to devise a design. Such awareness is prerequisite to creative freedom. Properly consulted, then, architectural theory is not narrowly prescriptive; its purpose is to establish the range of liberty, even when that freedom is subordinated to a regulatory system. Rather than constricting with narrow dictates, theory enables and inspires.

Ideas about architecture occur in the literature of history, formal analysis, criticism, and theory. Their inclusion in all these categories of discourse, however, does not amount to the expounding of theory, because each category has its own distinct purpose. History traces developments, analysis explains, criticism interprets, and theory advocates. In the course of the last two centuries the boundaries between these various genres have become less distinct, so that a historical treatment of architectural theory must distinguish at the outset what sort of material is to be examined. Properly speaking, architectural theory is active in outlook, whereas the other types of writing are contemplative. Because theories of architecture are concerned with the way architecture ought to be, they are usually couched as apologies for a particular outlook. This book is concerned only with the literature of advocacy.

The cultural phenomenon of writing about the way buildings should be designed is peculiar to Western civi-

lization of the last two millennia. More precisely, the continuous tradition began only in the middle of the fifteenth century, looking back to a single precedent in antiquity, from the first years of the Roman Empire. Although specifications for the format and appearance of particular types of buildings do exist in other cultures, such instructions do not have a broader relevance and do not function as guidelines for the architecture of an entire society. With the theory of architecture, then, we are dealing with a cultural concern that was limited to portions of Europe until the nineteenth century, when it spread to the United States.

Architectural theory has been expounded in numerous treatises, among which only a few have enjoyed wide and lasting influence. It is to those influential few, the authors of which are still invoked in everyday professional discourse about architecture, that this book is primarily directed. The scope of those treatises varies considerably. Some of the best-known examples attempt to be comprehensive, treating practical as well as conceptual matters. Others are more limited, focusing on discrete issues of great concern to the author.

Either way, one of the ironies of the fate of theoretical writings is that the material concerning practice remains relevant, if at all, for only a short time or within a narrow geographical compass. Injunctions pertaining to particular formulations of technical details of construction are the most ephemeral, followed by matters relating to functional use, whereas passages addressed to formal qualities and cultural significance may remain of interest indefinitely. Thus it is that even the most famous and influential treatises are now remembered and consulted only for portions of their text. From this circumstance we may deduce at the outset an important principle regarding the most durable aspect of the theory of architecture, namely that lasting theory is addressed foremost to conceptual matters, especially

matters concerning design and design quality. Put another way, enduring theory is about the quest for satisfying form and cultural appropriateness in buildings. This residue of the historical corpus of theoretical treatises is the subject of this book.

The theorists included in this survey necessarily represent a personal selection from the array of established texts and themes that might be treated. Indeed, it is unlikely that any two people undertaking the same task would have chosen exactly the same treatises to represent the wisdom of the theory of architecture. Moreover, the theorists I have chosen as spokespersons for particular themes are those I judge the most memorable, most timely, or most lucid, not necessarily the first to have articulated the idea at issue. Indeed, almost any theorist can be shown to have predecessors for virtually any idea. I am more concerned with delineating issues, so my treatment is less a narrative history than a historical essay, that is, a carefully considered personal synthesis of the literary monuments of an architectural culture.

Whatever its limitations, this book has been motivated by a concern for its relevance to the present and the hope that it may be useful to working practitioners. It is meant to be a guide to the aspects of the historical tradition of architectural theory that have been widely influential in the past and remain vital today. It attempts to arrange the basic ideas in some semblance of logical order. With this armature my aspiration has been not only to make sense of the theories from the past but also to establish a means for relating current or future ideas to the theoretical tradition. I hope that the following chapters may suggest how these ideas may be useful to creators of architecture, both patrons and architects.

For the sake of simplicity, short citations of secondary literature are given in the text by author and date and refer to full entries in the bibliography.