

## MODERN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY

*Modern Architectural Theory* is the first book to provide a comprehensive survey of architectural theory, primarily in Europe and the United States, during three centuries of development. In this synthetic overview, Harry Mallgrave examines architectural discourse within its social and political context. He explores the philosophical and conceptual evolution of its ideas, discusses the relation of theory to the practice of building, and, most importantly, considers the words of the architects themselves as they contentiously shaped Western architecture. He also examines the compelling currents of French rationalist and British empiricist thought, the radical reformation of theory during the Enlightenment, the intellectual ambitions and historicist debates of the nineteenth century, and the distinctive varieties of modern theory in the twentieth century up to the profound social upheaval of the 1960s. *Modern Architectural Theory* challenges many assumptions about architectural modernism and uncovers many new dimensions of the debates about modernism.

As a distinguished historian, Harry Francis Mallgrave has long dedicated himself to mining the architectural ideas of the past three centuries. For nearly two decades he served as the Editor of *Architecture and Aesthetics* for the highly acclaimed “Texts and Documents Series” of the Getty Research Institute, in which capacity he was engaged in the publication of more than twenty volumes devoted to theoretical matters. He has authored, edited, and translated numerous books, among which his intellectual biography, *Gottfried Semper: Architect of the Nineteenth Century*, received the Alice David Hitchcock Award from the Society of Architectural Historians. He currently resides in Vero Beach, Florida, and has returned to architectural practice.

Cambridge University Press  
0521793068 - Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968  
Harry Francis Mallgrave  
Frontmatter  
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# **MODERN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY**

A Historical Survey, 1673–1968

**HARRY FRANCIS MALLGRAVE**



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521793063](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521793063)

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First published 2005

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Mallgrave, Harry Francis.  
 Modern architectural theory : a historical survey, 1673-1968 /  
 Harry Francis Mallgrave.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-79306-8 (hb)

1. Architecture - Philosophy - History.
2. Architecture, Modern. I. Title.

NA2500.M28 2005

720'.1 - dc22 2004045916

ISBN-13 978-0-521-79306-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-79306-8 hardback

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*To Susan*



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## PREFACE

An encounter with the architectural ideas of the past few centuries is a little like rushing upon a sleeping Proteus – the mythical sea god and herdsman of seals who (to Odysseus) had the power to take all manners of shapes. One has to hold on fast as theory evolves through its many guises until at last it is forced to reveal its true identity. In the seventeenth century, it was codified and was more or less restricted to one or two academies; its main ideas were expounded through lectures and treatises. During the Enlightenment, it steps out into the public forum for the first time, and nonacademic viewpoints begin to challenge accepted academic dogmas. The rise of national identities and the availability of architectural journals in the nineteenth century vastly expanded and facilitated theoretical discourse. And of course the manifestos of the twentieth century were usually short, minimalist polemical statements, sometimes cogently reduced to axiomatic diagrams or simple sketches. We shall take architectural theory in its broadest sense and define it simply as the history of architectural ideas, literary or otherwise. Further, as every generation possesses the need to define itself in relation to what exists, architectural theory has almost always been a reaction to the past.

The present work seeks to narrate the main lines of modern architectural thought from 1673 to the troubling year of 1968. These dates may appear arbitrary, but they have a foundation. To start with, the words *theory* and *modern* both first came into prominence in the late seventeenth century. The Greek and Latin word *theoria* – related to the Greek words *theoros* (spectator), *theos* (divine being), and *theatron* (theater) – had several meanings in early antiquity. It could refer to a person consulting an oracle, someone participating or assisting in a religious festival, or (perhaps most

anciently) the experience of looking at a god. Reflecting on this fact, David Leatherbarrow, in a discussion of the poetic meaning of *theory*, highlighted someone experiencing a religious epiphany or turning one's life around.<sup>1</sup> In later antiquity, the term came to mean "looking at, viewing, or contemplation." Aristotle, for instance, employed *theoria* to signify "to contemplate, to consider," as well as to refer to an "object of contemplation."<sup>2</sup> Cicero, in a letter to Atticus, used the Greek word loosely in this sense, but this interpretation remained relatively rare in Latin until the word was applied to philosophical matters during the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> The Roman architect Vitruvius, in making his famous distinction between theory and practice, for instance, employed *ratiocinatio* for the former, a word meaning "the process of reasoning, calculation, ratiocination, or theorizing."<sup>4</sup>

The Italian word *teoria* appears occasionally in artistic literature in the late Renaissance.<sup>5</sup> In the 1558 edition of *Le vite* (Lives), Giorgio Vasari used *teorica* at the beginning of his sketch of Alberti to refer to a set of theoretical beliefs that an artist should successfully marry with *pratica* (practice).<sup>6</sup> One year earlier, Daniel Barbaro, in his Italian translation of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, translated *ratiocinatio* as *discorso*.<sup>7</sup> Because the Italian words *calculatione* and *ratiocinatione* were the preferred terms for translating *ratiocinatio* earlier in the century, Barbaro was probably following the lead of Jean Martin, who in 1547 had translated this term into French as *discours*.<sup>8</sup> In any case, it was not until the next century that *théorie* became widely adopted into French, *theory* into English, first in the sciences. In 1656, Blaise Pascal, in his seventh *Provincial Letter*, used *théorie* entirely in the modern sense, that is, to

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refer to the opposite of practice.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, Claude Perrault, in his 1673 translation of Vitruvius, chose *théorie* for the Latin *rationatio*. This term and its variants almost immediately became standard in architectural discussions throughout Europe. An English translation of an abridged version of Perrault's text, published in 1692, first established its architectural usage in this language.<sup>10</sup> *Theory* seems to have fit the body of architectural thought so well that, in a reprint of this book eleven years later, the title was changed to *The Theory and Practice of Architecture; or Vitruvius and Vignola Abridg'd*.<sup>11</sup>

Conveniently, *modern* also came into usage around this time. Its Latin root *modernus* first appeared in the late fifth century A.D., although other words in early antiquity were used to express the same concept.<sup>12</sup> Its use finally became prevalent by the eight or ninth century, in such forms as *modernitas* (of the present day) and *moderni* (modern people). It was the "quarrel of the ancients and moderns" in the late seventeenth century, however, that popularized *modern* as an art term. The "quarrel," an artistic and literary controversy of the 1670s and 1680s, was crucial to the formation of modern theory. It pitted those who defended the artistic superiority of the classical Greek and Roman periods against those who espoused the superiority of modern artists, with their more "reasoned" rules and refined tastes.<sup>13</sup> The "ancients," to put it generally, preferred the "ornaments" devised in classical times to newer and more modern inventions. The "moderns," while acknowledging the profit to be gained by studying the past, dared to criticize antiquity for its "imperfections" and sought to improve on them. And whereas this quarrel in most studies is generally consigned to the late 1680s, it really began in architectural circles as the result of a single footnote – again found in Perrault's 1673 translation of Vitruvius.

The choice of the year 1968 to conclude this study also deserves a few words. To begin with, this year was chosen not because it signifies an end to modernity or the death of architecture, nor because it signifies some greater paradigm shift within the conceptual development of global thought. This book will not debate the relevancy of the culture industry, the notion of an avant-garde predicated on the "scars of damage and disruption," or even the montage of artistic life suspended in a Benjaminian postauratic world.<sup>14</sup> Francesco Dal Co recently pointed out the odd coincidence of the current success of theory in academe with "a depletion of theoretical production on the part of practicing architects and with an increasingly accentuated autonomy claimed by historical research."<sup>15</sup> This suggestion – that theory prospers

where theory in practice falters, and vice versa – is indeed an intriguing one because it highlights the resistance of a theory to overly conceptualized modeling. Architectural theory is perhaps better seen as a relatively closed body or culture of ideas formed over centuries, ideas that remain remarkably stable in the face of constantly changing contexts. And in this sense it can certainly be argued that architectural discourse moves quite seamlessly through the late 1960s and early 1970s with no discernible sign of a rupture or breakdown of thought.

Nevertheless, the year 1968 is more than a convenient resting point. It was a year of dramatic social confrontation and upheaval characterized by a dislocation of strategies and sensitivities comparable to what would result from a war or a severe economic downturn. The year and its events challenged the relevancy of the current body of architectural theory and, in the process, injected a measure of intellectual fatigue, politics, and cynicism into the discourse – even if these features resonated with very different political overtones in Europe and Asia than in North America. We also should not overlook feelings of anger and futility and the widespread loss of confidence on the part of architects in their timeless desire to change the world. If theoretical deliberation in the 1970s moves, on the one hand, to resemanticize forms and, on the other hand, to desemanticize their former content, both efforts can be seen as born of the very same impulse. Theory did not change in 1968, but its context radically shifted.

I also want to stress that a history of theory is different from a history of architecture. The emphasis in the former is on ideas, and some major architects have had only a small effect on the course of theory whereas some minor architects have had a large impact. Thus, the pattern of theory is different for that of history. Similarly, if I have privileged certain movements or institutions – such as the De Stijl movement and the Bauhaus in the 1920s – it is not because I necessarily give historiographic preeminence to them within the context of this decade (as, admittedly, many historians have done in the past) but rather because they had a larger and more immediate influence on the theoretical terrain than other contemporary events. Further, although this study can by no means be comprehensive, I have striven to provide a balanced account of the development of Western theory in both its European and (somewhat later) North American manifestations.

Every book takes on a life of its own. The efforts that led to this book began with an invitation to the Clark Art Institute study center, and for this I owe a considerable debt to

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Michael Conforti and Michael Holly and to the library staff at this idyllic facility in scenic Williamstown. The final chapters of the book were completed at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, and I wish to thank Phyllis Lambert for her invitation and generosity and to express my gratitude to Louis Martin, Martin Bressani, Mario Carpo, Dirk De Meyer, and Spyros Papapetros for many discussions. The book owes much to the bibliographic resources of this great institution, supervised by Gerald Beasley, Pierre Boisvert, Renata Gutman, Suzie Quintal, Paul Chenier, and Françoise Roux. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Christina Contandriopoulos for her work on the illustrations. Also providing invaluable assistance at the Canadian Centre for Architecture were Nathalie Senecal and Aliko Economedes. I express my appreciation to Peg Wilson at my local library for her interlibrary-loan assistance. A very important grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Study in the Fine Arts

allowed me at one point to work full time on the project. I also owe a debt of gratitude to many other people for discussions over the years relating to this study, among them J. Duncan Berry, Marco Frascari, Barry Bergdoll, Henrik Karge, and Joan Ockman. Perhaps the strongest supporter of this enterprise was Beatrice Rehl, the distinguished editor at Cambridge University Press.

One final editorial note: I have in my citations employed the original spellings and accentuation even when they differ from modern usage. Also, a book of this historical scope can only be built on the historical investigations of many others. I have striven in all cases to recognize the sources I used, but the large scope of this enterprise makes it impossible to recognize in every case the efforts of those who shaped aspects of my own work over the years and to construct a comprehensive bibliography. I therefore apologize to all historians whose work I have not cited.