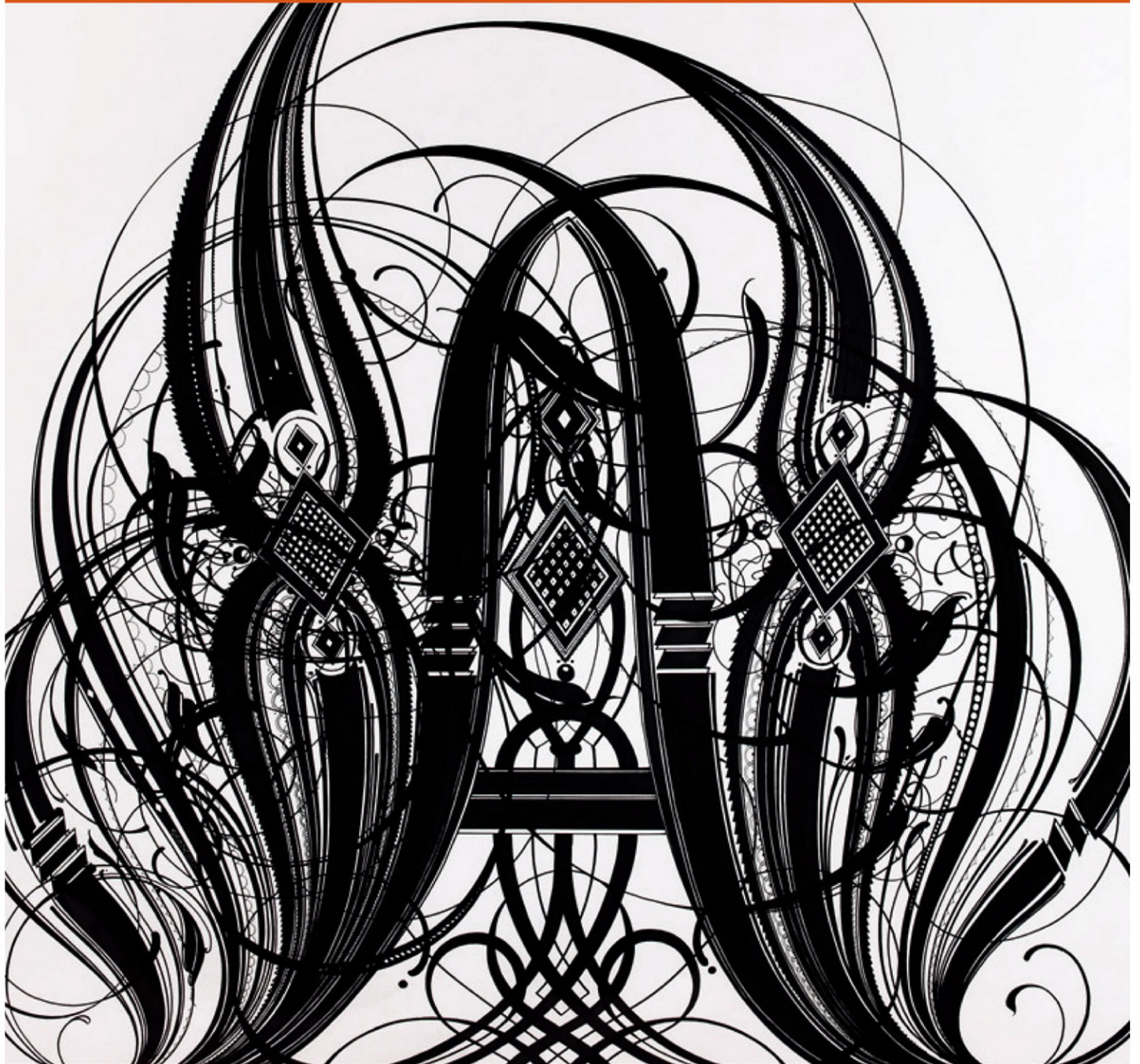


# AESTHETIC THEORY

## essential texts

FOR ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN



EDITED BY

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# ***Aesthetic Theory: Essential Texts for Architecture and Design***

Mark Foster Gage

## **Preface**

Aesthetic theory is a comparatively recent branch of philosophy, and, lacking a clear and well defined- recent trajectory, its contemporary reach is difficult to delineate. Claimants from an array of disciplines have extended its boundaries beyond the confines of only “beauty” since its establishment as a distinct philosophical endeavor in the early eighteenth century. It now includes not only the assumed questions of beauty, value, form, taste, and appropriateness but also collective ideas such as nationhood, political influence, and global economics. While the expansion of aesthetics into these areas has been fruitful for their respective understanding, it has also left aesthetics, as a discipline, increasingly formless and lacking traction for actual usefulness to the disciplines of design. This places aesthetic theory out of reach or interest from those who would most benefit from its study—ironically, the various curricula of architecture and design schools today rarely, if ever, address the subject.

For the purposes of this book this group is loosely defined as “architects and designers”—the first being responsible for the significant large-scale and spatial aspects of the built environment, and the latter for all varieties of graphic, industrial, fashion, furniture, and automotive design. A more precise definition of these disciplines is beyond the scope of this book; I merely offer as an axiom that while economic and other forces govern material production in many scenarios, for the production of form, and its related spatial constructs in which we live, there is more often than not a person who fulfills the role of “designer.” This person, whether educated or amateur, appropriately qualified or a mere hobbyist, culturally considerate or venally seeking profit, organizes the arrangement of matter and material into more specific forms for a variety of uses. It is certainly too sweeping a gesture to combine all such designers and architects under a common rubric given the disciplinary specificity and claims of autonomy that govern such disciplines, and yet we can surely acknowledge that anyone involved in the act of design can only benefit from understanding the relationship between physical form and its impact on the individual and society at large.

Design at all scales is a cultural act—one that places our limited resources of material in play, through spaces, buildings, and objects, with the individuals and societies who use them, and ultimately come to be identified, even defined, by them. This book offers theoretical observations from historic and contemporary sources and from a variety of viewpoints that address this relationship between the act of design, its subsequent forms, and their aesthetic influence—whether they are of an individual pleasurable nature or a collectively political one. The selections provide a theoretical framework that allows us to understand the design of form as not only the solution to functional problems, economic efficiencies, or performative requirements but also as the defining organizer for the physical, social, and cultural landscapes in which we exist.

The selections here are from philosophy, art history, literary criticism, architectural practice, Renaissance scholarship, critical theory, and the cognitive neurosciences. Some are complete book chapters or essays, and some surgically extracted excerpts from writings primarily focused on topics seemingly distant from aesthetic theory, yet all offer insights into the importance of considering form relative to its aesthetic qualities and influence. This is not to diminish other ways of understanding architecture or design, and is not a call-to-arms to *only* consider the aesthetic qualities of what we produce. Instead these texts offer sometimes new, sometimes merely forgotten critical insights that reveal the act of design to be among the most significant and influential acts in which any individual or society can engage.

Practitioners, students, and teachers involved in architecture and design are the primary audience, but those from other disciplines will also find much of interest here. What is unique about this book is that it considers aesthetic theory as it pertains particularly to understanding the design of form. In many instances, however, discussions involving “the arts” are particularly illuminating when considered as they may relate to more “functional” problems of design. Some texts, accordingly, refer to art practices and artistic contemplation, although primarily as a means to induce corollary understandings in the more generic term, form. This is particularly true of the texts with a more formalist valence that propose that the aesthetic impact of a form is independent of its functional aspects—therefore diminishing the importance of its distinction as “art”—or its being or not being “functional.”

I have organized the selections in unfashionably chronological order rather than by theme or the discipline from which they emerged so I could introduce readers to ideas as they developed through history

and were adopted and altered by subsequent figures. Such organization also encourages readers to develop their own themes and points of reference. While the exact historical or philosophical context of the ideas is not critical for the purposes of these arguments, sometimes I felt that such cross-referencing between times and figures was important as a device for showing variations on particular strains of thought. I introduce each selection briefly. These introductions are not intended to provide comprehensive analysis or delve into the historic context in which the material was written, but only to extract the most significant concepts as they pertain to the overall theme of aesthetic theory as related to architecture and design.

Notes to the commentary describe and interconnect particular ideas.

The texts are unaltered except for minor grammatical, spelling or formatting corrections when required to update the text to contemporary practice. Notes of the authors, editors, or translators included in the original text are preserved as endnotes to the selections; any comments I have made in these notes are secured in brackets with my initials [M.F.G.], to indicate my intrusion. Two selections refer to the academic referencing devices typically associated with such texts. For works by Aristotle the book includes the Bekker citations, and, for the selections from Leon Battista Alberti, parentheses included after each section contain two sets of numbers—the first referring to the Orlandi/ Polifilo edition of *De Re Aedificatoria* and second set referring to the *edition princeps* of the same text from 1486.

My interest in aesthetic theory emerged largely from a productive, if conflicted, twenty-year fascination with architectural theory as it developed between 1980 and 2000, which saw the continued rise of critical theory in architecture. The intellectual datum against which architectural discourse registered was probably never set as high as it was during this period. However, as noted by K. Michael Hays in his defining compendium *Architecture Theory since 1968*, this particular brand of heightened theoretical awareness was not easily reconcilable with the actual production of form. And so I feel it reasonable to champion the intellectual productivity of this period while simultaneously admitting that it ultimately proved unable to significantly guide the production of physical form. It was largely my own frustration, or perhaps inability, to knit these interests together that led me to search outside the more “legitimized” territories of architectural theory and seek other sources to inform my own intellectual position and design work.

Over the past ten years I have taught research seminars and design studios that addressed this material both directly and peripherally. The resulting book is informed by these experiences as it is by my architecture and design practice. As such it embodies both academic and practical ambitions and is intended to span the divide that continues to largely isolate these pursuits. I therefore do not cover debates on whether beauty exists, whether the topic is too dangerous, too outdated, too politically charged, too feminine, too antifeminist, or just too subjective to discuss. Rather I accept as fact that form is the fundamental material of architecture and design and that beauty exists—but that it is not necessarily the only aesthetic relationship that we can have with our work.

As with any such publication, space is limited. I could have included many more selections; this is by no means an exhaustive study. I omitted the religious positions of Augustine and Aquinas, and the important historic contributions of Adorno, Hume, Herbert, Schopenhauer, Marx, Ruskin, Hanslick, Wittgenstein, Lacan, Lefebvre, Debord, Hickey, Sibley, Scruton, Steiner, and others to better focus this book as a carefully curated collection of isolated texts from particular figures from particular times—all of which offer insights relevant to the continuing efforts of architecture and design. With this book I hope to prompt further discussion and debate to continue the intellectual and architectural ferment that defined the end of the last millennium into the new forms and ideas that will illuminate the next.

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