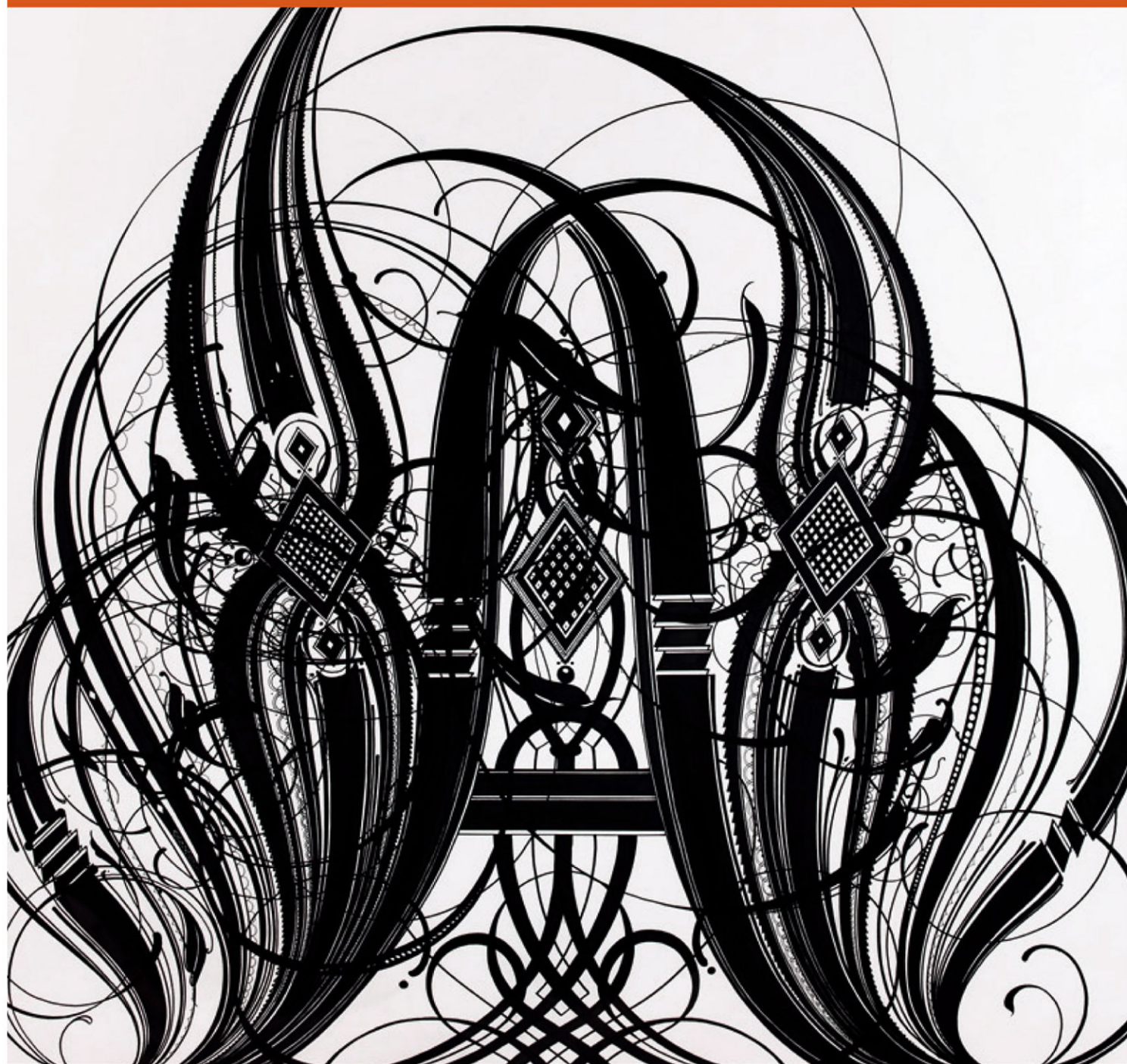


AESTHETIC THEORY

essential texts

FOR ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN



EDITED BY

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Aesthetic Theory: Essential Texts for Architecture and Design

Mark Foster Gage

Introduction

The decades surrounding the turn of the millennium have witnessed unparalleled engagement with architectural theory, as evidenced in anthologies edited by K. Michael Hays, Kate Nesbitt, and A. Krista Sykes.¹ These books provide access to the most significant theoretical contributions of the period, covering everything from the emergence of postmodernism through the rise of deconstruction, critical theory, and digital technology to questions of sustainability. Now, with the benefit of hindsight, a new view is beginning to emerge from which we can begin to assess how theory has impacted design and how it has not, and what theoretical avenues we might begin to address today to guide emerging architectural directions. While the theoretical contributions of this recent past have certainly revealed new social, intellectual, and ethical territories for architectural influence and responsibility, they have been largely focused on *explaining* architecture's role in society, and have been less helpful in their ability to inform the act of designing. My intention is to provide a framework for understanding how aesthetic theory, the branch of philosophy most involved with questions of form and its appearance, might prompt new theoretical discussions from an emerging generation of architects and designers armed with new technologies, materials, and responsibilities all focused on form.

Two strains of architectural theory were particularly influential on intellectually engaged practice during this loosely defined three-decade period. First was the fusion of critical and architectural theory that produced what is commonly called "the critical project" in architecture, a dense and complex subject characterized by K. Michael Hays as a "coupling of Marxian critical theory and post-structuralism with readings of architectural modernism."² The primary ambition of the critical project was to reveal the underlying, and often unseen, political, social, and economic power structures that govern the societies in which we live and to introduce, in the words of Foucault and Lacan scholar David Macey, "a form of self-consciousness that can act as a guide to emancipatory action."³

The influence of critical theory in architecture spanned largely from the rise of Tafuri in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the turn of the millennium; when shortly thereafter essays by Sylvia Lavin, Sarah Whiting, Robert Somol, Stan Alan, and Michael Speaks began to introduce new theoretical directions that

largely forecasted the end of its influence.⁴ While never defined as possessing a clear agenda of its own, the “postcritical” era (in which we seemingly still find ourselves today) was deemed to have begun. At roughly the same time as the critical theory began to lose traction, new intellectual directions were introduced into the profession by the gradual appearance of computers, increasingly used as design tools. The use of computation allowed designers to organize large bodies of data in the form of various new diagrams and mappings; its graphic capabilities gave designers access to new illustrative and collage tools, and provided a means of producing entirely new families of form. Different schools of thought sought to position the varied uses of computation in architecture through theoretical discourses including chaos and field theory, data mapping and mining, branding, virtuality, posthumanism, and postgeometry mathematics, to name a few. I do not mean to suggest that the critical project and the subsequent introduction of the digital were the only significant developments in architectural theory of the period, but they were certainly the most influential for intellectually engaged theories of practice.

The theoretical assumptions of both the critical project and computationally based design⁵ assumed that a direct correlation exists between abstract concepts (intellectual) and physical forms (sensate). While the two strains of thought might appear vastly different, one being primarily social/critical and the other fundamentally mathematical, both rely wholly on the same process of conceptual abstraction. The *philosophical* framework for both was therefore identical. The reliance on abstract concepts to justify form wholly eclipsed an alternative strain, that of aesthetic theory, which was not an obvious theoretical direction to address the sweeping changes brought about by the political and social upheavals of the sixties (better addressed by critical theory) and the technical developments of the following decades (better addressed by the mathematically based support for digital work).

The philosophical basis for both the critical project and the early digital theory was deeply rooted in the classical philosophical tradition of Plato,⁶ who championed a direct link between abstract concepts and physical forms. This foundation was further reinforced by the much later rationalistic enlightenment tendencies of architectural modernism that reinforced the link between physical forms and abstract intellectual concepts—where forms were organized into larger groups (for example, domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species) and judged not for their individual qualities, but for their associations with other forms or processes. Critical or mathematical ideas therefore justified the

production and existence of forms to which the ideas were attached. At least since the 1980s (if not largely since the emergence of Modernism or even as far back as the late Enlightenment), the discourses of architecture and design have adhered to a similar philosophical basis that was *abstractly conceptual*. This intellectual stance is, by virtue of its reliance on formless concepts, inherently (although the term is aggressive) *antiformalist*,⁷ and therefore largely incapable of directly referring to actual production of form.

Antiformalist theory is a difficult territory for architecture and design to exist, as these disciplines all deal with the problem of form—how it is produced, how it functions, how it appears and how it participates in the culture. All design problems, especially of the aforementioned physical disciplines, involve form as a physical product. In a contemporary moment of reflection, we now realize that decades of largely antiformalist theory have governed our primarily formal disciplines with the result that, among other consequences, a vast rift now separates how architects and designers discuss and legitimize their work, relative to how society receives, understands, and values it.⁸

Architects and designers today employ *abstract concepts*, whether these are the familiar use of architectural symbols, signs, and indexes, or other performative criteria, such as sustainability. The public at large, however, judges our work *aesthetically*, largely without the knowledge to interpret such works in terms of their signifying value or ability to function in particular ways. This is not a life-threatening disjunction, although it does lodge architecture in the realm of the elite, because only those with the required knowledge are able to decipher the related conceptual content. A similar problem occurs in the contemporary obsession with architectural “program,” whereby a programmatic problem is studied to reveal a novel programmatic solution that, accordingly, determines the resulting architectural form. The form is legitimized, in this case, through its ability to solve the abstract problem set at the beginning—not from the resultant form itself. Seemingly innocuous, these attitudes, however, have a serious and rarely considered impact on the question of value for architecture.

To be blunt, architecture seems to be losing value. This is a claim that I’m willing to make across all spectrums—whether they be cultural, economic, or political. Architecture and design can no longer be culturally relevant in a world defined only by bottom-line efficiencies, simplistic natural metaphors, or strict adherence to performance guidelines, sustainable or otherwise. These requirements are also, like the theoretical basis for the critical and digital projects, *abstract concepts* that force us to reconcile architectural

forms with some other ideas in which they are expected to participate. Thus we are reinforcing a system where architecture is being legitimized not for what it is, physical architecture, but only what it can do or can successfully *refer* to. So a “successful” building is one that meets certain sustainable LEED criteria, or looks enough like a bird to convey a sense of speed for a transportation hub, or looks like a shimmering mountain and therefore fits in “contextually” with the backdrop of nearby mountains, or is particularly well suited for librarians to wheel carts in a particular direction down a spiral of books. In each of these examples a building is not valuable because of its actual, formal, architectural characteristics, but because of other abstract concepts through which it is legitimized by the designer and which accordingly explain its formal qualities. Even worse, architecture now degenerates into abstract absurdity, historical cliché, and camp to be recognized *at all* against a backdrop of mediocrity that is beginning to define the contemporary built environment. Such is the result of having surrendered the willingness to engage in the aesthetic discussions through which our projects are almost entirely judged by the public of users,⁹ who have accordingly devalued our contributions to society. That is not to suggest that there are not many ways of understanding, studying, and producing architecture, but certainly the case must be made that we at least *begin* to address the aesthetic filters through which our work is judged by the majority of its users.

Aesthetic theory, particularly in its formalist strain,¹⁰ focuses on actual form as opposed to concepts of form and offers alternative means for understanding how buildings, spaces, and objects can be reconciled with ideas about individual and societal value. The starting point for these theoretical relationships is not conceptual but aesthetic, sensate, and even emotional. All relationships between people and forms are not, as the critical and computational projects inherently suggested, governed by abstract intellectual concepts in the form of social, performative, or procedural value. Aesthetic theory, as presented by the selections in this book, offers an array of alternate methods through which we can understand this important relationship between form and value. As is now becoming clearer, such theories have been, particularly since the emergence of Modernism in architecture, largely eclipsed in favor of a scientific mentality that legitimizes form by using the aforementioned conceptual abstractions. With all the noble, hygienic, and democratic ambitions that Modernism sought to realize, when coupled with such an emphasis on conceptual abstraction, it also had the unintended consequence of devaluing the ineffable, formal, and sensory qualities in which architecture had been historically rooted. If these qualities give architecture its value in a society, then

buildings lose significant value in that society when it fails to give attention to such qualities. The selections in this book are intended to introduce new, and sometimes merely forgotten, means of understanding this relationship between designed form and cultural value.

As previously noted, architecture today faces multiple master-narratives that seek to further transform it into a sustainable-cum-scientific endeavor. Undoubtedly our buildings must be sustainable. They *must* be efficient, power saving, resource responsible, and easily maintained. To propose anything less is to abdicate our responsibility to our limited resources. This responsibility to our resources, however, should not be confused as the only way in which we can judge our architecture. There must be an equally significant way to judge architectural value in nonscientific terms as well—that is to say in terms of its physical, formal, and aesthetic impact. Aesthetic theory is the obvious starting point through which to understand this distinction—and to prevent the reduction of architecture to a mere contraption for isolated performance and judged only as such.

A similar problem arises for those who insist that architecture is only a solution to problems—whether they be programmatic, political, or economic. Architecture must be more than what it does,¹¹ how little it costs, how quickly it was built, or how much energy it can save. Aesthetic theory offers us a way to understand the value of our work in reconsidered terms without conflicting with those worthy pursuits. Aesthetic theory only questions them or any other abstract concepts as they pertain to form, as the *only* gauges of architectural or design success. Here exists the key to the value of a form-based aesthetic position—that architecture is *primarily* valued because of its formal properties, and that other conceptual properties may exist as important and worthy aims, but they are not the primary sources for which architecture is culturally valued. At a time when industrial production is being challenged by new modes of manufacturing, and the Enlightenment tendency toward the isolation of disciplines is giving way to new cross-disciplinary forms of intelligence, when biology blends into technology, materials adopt new forms of intelligence, and robotics rewrite the human definitions of craft, it is clear that a new framework of theoretical support is needed to understand the relevance of tomorrow's forms.¹²

Aesthetic theory has been long absent from the discourses of architecture and design. It is somewhat telling that there have been few, if any, books, anthologies or otherwise, produced in the last several decades that address the topic of aesthetics as it relates to designers, the forms they produce, and audience for which

such forms are intended.¹³ The curricula of architecture or design schools reveal little, if any, evidence of courses that address the subject of aesthetics. An easy excuse for this is that the thinking architecture and design community has simply been too involved in the performative theoretical endeavors. Nonetheless, aesthetic theory is not a frivolous pursuit: it is the branch of philosophy that deals with the artistic categories of the beautiful as well as the forms and products of architecture and design as they directly relate to individual and collective users. As architecture and design move quickly into an era governed by new formal languages and methods of practice, they are poised to undergo a profound but as yet unarticulated theoretical revolution. Aesthetic theory, which has historically speculated on the relationship between physical forms and their influence on the individual and society, seems a particularly fruitful avenue of thought to address as these shifts in practice begin to take place.

The nineteenth-century art scholar Conrad Fiedler observed that humans are better trained to judge abstractions of objects than the objects themselves. This suggests that we can better comment on the *idea* of a blue vase than on the visual information obtained by actually looking at a specific blue vase. Architecture is among the last remaining disciplines that insist on being physically experienced. As soon as architecture stops insisting on this particular form of engagement, it will exist only and entirely as an abstract concept, uprooted from its physicality and associated sensory values. It then becomes only another manipulable idea and abandons all of its inherent resistance to political and corporate subsumation as outlined in the critical project. Herein lay the highest stakes of the struggle between intellectual ambitions to value form as abstract concept and aesthetics, an ability to understand and value form in physical and sensate terms. Hints of resistance to the domination of abstraction are emerging in new theoretical discussions involving sensation, affect, atmosphere, and the physicality of actual experiences. While the selections in this book do not refer to these growing movements directly, they offer a history of the aesthetic thought from which many of these theories can trace their ancestry. The selections range over two millennia of aesthetic thought, and owe allegiance to no particular time period or movement. They are particularly relevant now, as intellectual abstraction is being questioned by a new generation of thinkers and designers no longer satisfied with *only* an abstract conceptual basis of architectural and design practice.

This book accepts as an axiom that form matters. And that while the forms that emerge from the next century of practice will, of course, be efficient, problem-solving, and sustainable, they need not be

justified *only* in these terms. Design is a fundamental act of existence, a switch that allows us to place our bodies in relation to the world of matter in which we find ourselves. It defines our very humanity and assures our continued existence and survival in this world. Aesthetic theory is about the difficult concept of beauty, and specifically about the problem of form—how it affects us, how it is judged, how it defines our environment and ourselves. The selections that follow are a reintroduction to the value of this theoretical material, and are intended to ignite new ways of thinking about not only about our relationship with the forms of architecture and design today, but how they will continue to interest, challenge, and define us in the new millennium only now beginning to unfold.

¹ See K. Michael Hays, *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Kate Nesbitt, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965–1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996); Krista Sykes, *Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993–2009* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

² Sykes further emphasizes the presence of the Frankfurt School as a source for these influences as cited by Hays. See Hays, introduction, xiv, footnote 1. See also Sykes, Introduction, 14.

³ David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2001), 76.

⁴ For a clear history of the emergence of the "postcritical," see George Baird, "'Criticality' and Its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine*, no.21 (fall 2004/winter 2005), 1–6. For the sources themselves see Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33: *The Yale Architectural Journal* (2002), 73; and Michael Speaks, "Design Intelligence and the New Economy," *Architectural Record* (January 2002), 72–79.

For an early and important claim of a noncritical contemporaneity see Sylvia Lavin, "In a Contemporary Mood," *Latent Utopias: Experiments within Contemporary Architecture*, ed. Zaha Hadid and Patrik Schumacher (Graz: Steirischer Herbst, 2002), 46–47. It should be noted that the appearance of these texts also roughly coincided with the closing in 2000 of the last remaining venue for discussion of the "critical" in architecture, the academic journal *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*.

⁵ The theoretical support for early digital experimentation was largely based on the writings by Gilles Deleuze, particularly in his essay *Le Pli* (the fold), translated into English in 1993. This particular strain of architectural thought was brought firmly into architectural discourse by Peter Eisenman and, in particular, Greg Lynn, who in that same year guest-edited a pivotal issue of *Architectural Design* entitled "Folding in Architecture" (see Greg Lynn, ed., *Folding in Architecture* [London: Academy Editions, 1993]). An excellent recounting of the relationship between early digital experimentation and its theoretical basis was written by Antoine Picon in *Digital Culture in Architecture: An Introduction for the Design Professions* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2010).

⁶ See the introduction to and selections by Plato in this book.

⁷ When discussing formalism I use the definition that suggests that, for architecture or design, form *primarily* receives its value from its formal properties. That does not suggest that architectural form, or any designed form, has no other worthy conceptual properties. For additional information on the definition of formalism which I adopted, see Michael Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 213.

⁸It is interesting to note Walter Benjamin's related observation that "The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public." See the selection by Benjamin in this book.

⁹ And so instead of addressing this divide, we chose to intellectualize the lowest common denominator and, not surprisingly, are faced now with so-called serious theoretical discussions reflecting on neo-postmodernism and "the absurd."

¹⁰ Formal aesthetic theory deals with, as the name suggests, problems of "form" and how the sensate properties of physical form affect the viewer and users.

¹¹ Especially as architecture rarely maintains the same use over time and is among the "arts" the most susceptible to frequent modifications. To legitimize architecture by its initial use is to utterly devalue it as not only a solution to a problem, but also as a solution to a particular problem at a particular time—thereby further excluding it from any ambitions toward permanence or continued relevance. Naturally there are those who suggest that this is a reasonable assumption, to maintain that architecture is becoming less permanent and therefore a more disposable commodity, which, however, would beg for even more aesthetic consideration as architecture moves toward the short-term cycles of fashion.

¹² Although a complex claim for sure, one could make the case that as the Enlightenment taxonomies of various disciplines give way to a less definable cross-disciplinary ethics of practice, and the products of mechanical industry give way to new hybrids of computation, material science, and biology, that the abstract theoretical substrata on which all of these earlier developments have been historically based should now be very much in question.

¹³ One particular and interesting exception to this is by Neal Leach, who completely overturns his previous antiaesthetic position in *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* in his more recent book *Camouflage*. See Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and *Camouflage* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).