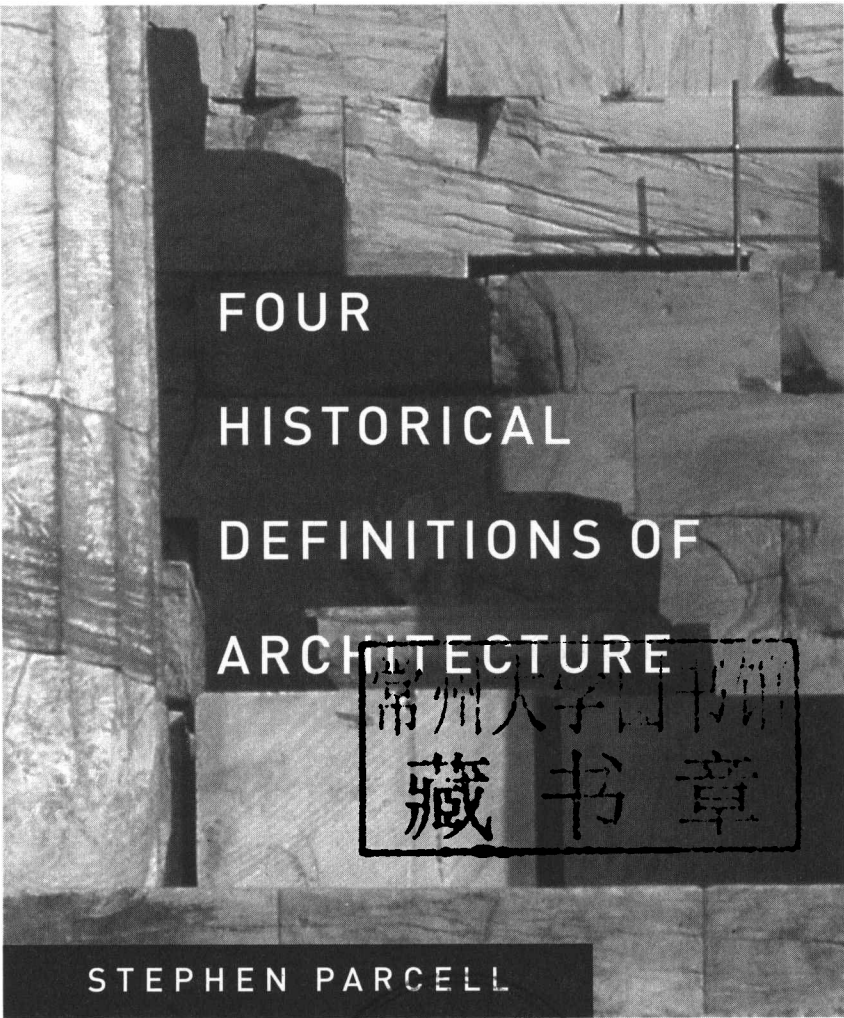
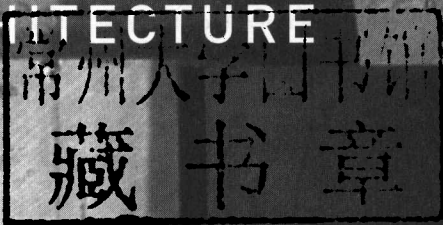


FOUR
HISTORICAL
DEFINITIONS OF
ARCHITECTURE

STEPHEN PARCELL



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STEPHEN PARCELL

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Introduction

This book investigates four historical definitions of Western architecture: as a *technē* in ancient Greece, as a mechanical art in medieval Europe, as an art of *disegno* in Renaissance Italy, and as a fine art in eighteenth-century Europe. These definitions situated architecture within larger classifications of knowledge. They established alliances between architecture and other disciplines. They also influenced elements of architectural practice that we now associate with three characters (the designer, the builder, and the dweller) and three things (material, drawing, and building). The book examines writings in these historical periods and focuses on the practical implications of several texts: Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon*; Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Book 1; and Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Essai sur l'art*. As a series, these four historical definitions show how the concept of architecture and the elements of architectural practice have changed. Even the word “architecture” has ambiguous roots.

Before embarking on a journey into architectural history, this introduction pauses to reflect on circumstances in the present. It considers some epistemological issues, raises some questions about current architectural practices, and prepares an itinerary for the historical chapters. It also steps briefly into a cognate discipline, music, that has shared some common ground with architecture for several hundred years and has begun a critical journey into its own historical definitions. Listening to philosophers of music discuss their discipline enables light to be cast obliquely onto our own. This musical preamble begins with a vivid institutional description by Christopher Small, placed in a historical and philosophical context by Lydia Goehr, and situated epistemologically by Paul Oskar Kristeller in a modern

classification that includes architecture. This preamble is followed by an equivalent circuit through current architectural conventions before departing for ancient Greece. This is the first of many interdisciplinary relationships that will be formed or broken throughout the book.

A Musical Preamble

Musicking

In *Musicking*, Christopher Small analyzes a typical performance of Western concert music.¹ He focuses on first-hand experience – the setting, the event, the characters, and their relationships – in a way that is both familiar and remote, using critical distance and some wry humour to question what we normally take for granted.

From outside, the concert hall is a grand building in the city, a beacon of culture for the initiated. After passing through a large entrance, we arrive in a grand foyer. It is decorated with chandeliers, statues, and mirrors, or is distorted spatially with ascending stairways, sloped ceilings, and angled walls that induce mild disorientation. This is a space for socializing and anticipating the performance to come.

Cued by a signal, we enter the auditorium and find the seats that have been assigned. The inner space of the auditorium is even larger than the foyer: a self-contained world with no vestiges of the city outside. There are no windows through which daylight or views can enter. The auditorium is also insulated from exterior sounds. Conversely, sounds inside the auditorium will remain contained. The decor of the hall is opulent but subdued, suggesting wealth but also seriousness. All of the seats face the same direction: toward a raised platform. The floor is sloped to provide a sightline from each seat. The seats are fixed and no one is permitted to move. Looking forward, one cannot see faces, only the backs of heads. In the auditorium, social activity among audience members is prohibited once the performance has begun. As the word “auditorium” suggests, this room is dedicated to hearing. One’s experience of the performance must not be disturbed by talking, coughing, foot-tapping, or humming. The performance is a form of communication in which the listener receives but does not respond in a noticeable way. The design of the auditorium and its accompanying etiquette indicate that this is an event for many private individuals, not for

a social group. During the performance, an invisible threshold at the edge of the stage separates the performers from the listeners. Physical contact between the two groups is prohibited. The performers remain out of sight before the performance and disappear soon after it finishes. The performers and the audience also use separate doors to enter and exit the building.

The performance begins. Led by a conductor, the performers faithfully follow the notations in the score from beginning to end. The composer probably died long ago, so the score is now the sole authority. The musical work is presented for its own sake. It is not an accompaniment to a social event. The audience listens attentively to appreciate the musical work through the performance. A stellar performance will let the work shine through. Any emotions expressed by the performers suggest that the composer felt similar emotions and wished to evoke them in the listeners. After being performed thousands of times, this work has become part of the classical canon. By comparing this performance to others, listeners can discern subtle differences and judge its relative merits. The audience marks the end of the performance by applauding. The performers bow to the audience and depart.

As Christopher Small and others have noted, we take this institution for granted as the standard way of composing, performing, and listening to music; however, it is barely two hundred years old and is European in origin. Due to its formal etiquette, a classical concert with Mozart or Beethoven on the bill provides the clearest example of this institution in action, but the same relationships are evident in performances of popular music and even recorded music.

The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works

In *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Lydia Goehr situates the concert hall in a larger historical and philosophical context.² She notes that Western music had been composed, performed, and listened to differently in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Composers were aware of the occasion at which their music would be performed, then customized the music to suit the particular instruments, place, and occasion. Their notations provided only basic guidelines for the performers, who improvised accordingly. The composer also might be present to perform and keep time. People attending a musical event did not merely listen but would applaud,

talk, or sing along. The music accompanied the social event; it was not valued for its own sake. The person who commissioned the music was regarded as its owner.

In the late eighteenth century, these elements of musical practice began to transform into the institution described by Christopher Small. Goehr associates elements of the concert hall with a pair of theoretical concepts – *das Werk* ('the work') and *die Werktreue* ('fidelity to the work,' 'authenticity') – that developed in Germany and spread to other Western countries. When composers started referring to their products as "works," this was not a benign change in terminology. The "musical work" concept defined a new network of socio-political relationships involving the composer, the performer, the listener, the sound, the performance, and the score. The companion concept, *die Werktreue*, refers to the faithfulness with which musicians perform the work by following the notations in the score, without adding anything superfluous or inconsistent. It also refers to the faithfulness with which listeners attend to the music when it is being performed.

The musical work has a curious ontological profile: It is not a concrete, physical object. It is not a private idea in the mind of a composer, performer, or listener. It does not exist in an eternal world of ideal, uncreated forms. It is not identical to any one of its performances. Its parts exist simultaneously, not temporally. It is not identical to its score, but performances and the score enable the work to be detected.

The musical work is also a governing concept that regulates a network of practices and institutions. The composer is recognized as the creator of the work and is entitled to ownership and copyright protection. The composition must be sufficiently novel to avoid plagiarism, even of a composer's previous work. The composer is expected to notate the work comprehensively in a score. Once the work is notated, it can exist on its own, without the composer. A musical work is not necessarily composed for a particular event or particular performers. Once created, the musical work exists in a virtual museum where it is fixed for posterity and may be brought out periodically for performance. To perform a work faithfully, the performers must follow the notation from beginning to end. If some characteristics (such as tempo and dynamics) are not fully notated, the performers must add them in a way that is faithful to the work. The listeners must pay close attention so that the work can be recognized through the performance.

These ontological and practical properties encompass not only “serious” music but also popular music and even folk music.³ Goehr notes that some individuals in the twentieth century composed or performed music in ways that challenged a few of these properties but did not really abandon the “work” concept or devise a comprehensive alternative.⁴ Like Christopher Small, Lydia Goehr presents current musical conventions in a critical way, stressing that their philosophical framework is not timeless and universal but is only two hundred years old and European in origin. Alternatives are invited but inertia is recognized.

The Modern System of the Arts

These two books by Small and Goehr focus strictly on music, but an architect who reads them may notice parallels in architecture. Mapping one discipline metaphorically onto the other relies on analogies between composer and designer, performer and builder, listener and dweller, sound and material, score and drawing, and performance and building. Parallels between the concept of a musical work and the concept of an architectural work also may be evident.

The larger framework that permits this mapping is an epistemological classification, the fine arts, that has included both music and architecture for the past 250 years. In his two-part essay “The Modern System of the Arts,” Paul Oskar Kristeller notes that the five major fine arts (painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and architecture) were rooted in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance thought, but did not form a set until the eighteenth century.⁵ Kristeller points out that concepts of taste, sentiment, genius, originality, and creative imagination are associated with the development of modern aesthetics in France, England, and Germany. He adds that the fine arts still rely on these concepts, despite minor modulations.⁶

To present the fine arts as a historically limited field, the first half of his essay surveys earlier eras in which these five arts were conceived differently and were not necessarily associated with one another. The second half of his essay discusses theoretical writings in the eighteenth century. As a scholar of Renaissance philosophy, Kristeller recognized the historical limits of the modern fine arts within a broader horizon. His essay is an implicit invitation for others to investigate the changing historical definitions of particular arts.

Epistemological Classifications

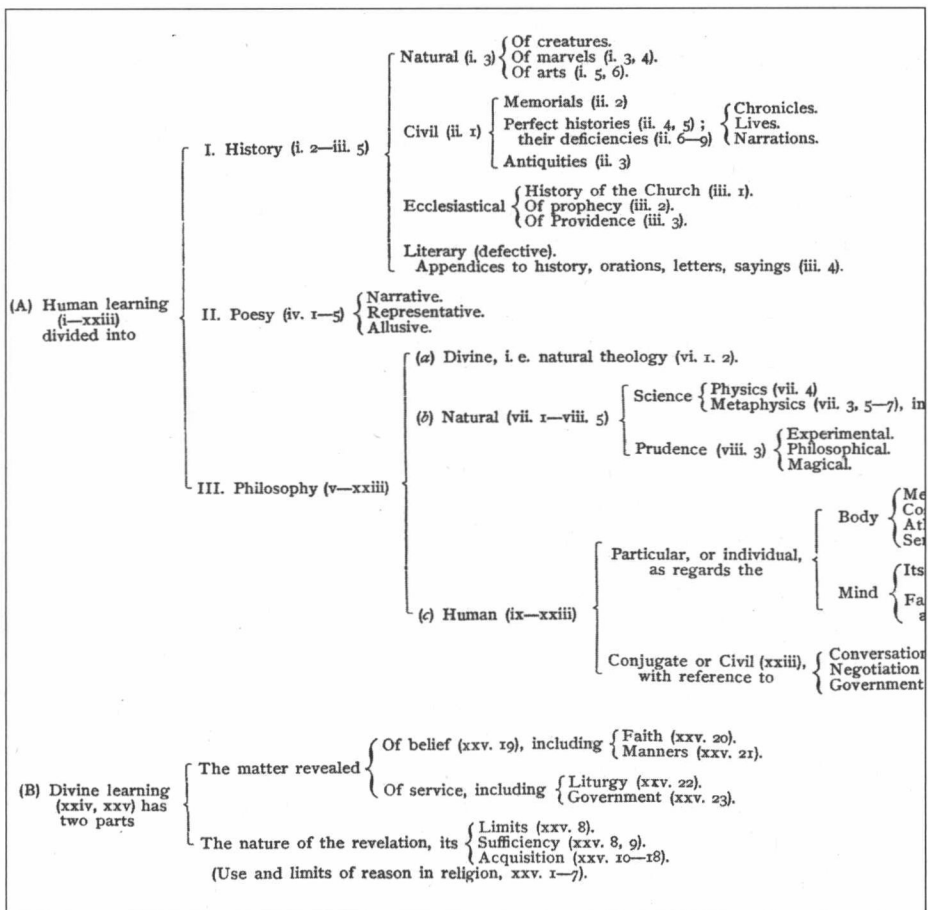
The present study accepts Kristeller's invitation by considering four definitions of architecture, each in a particular historical situation:

- architecture as a *technē* (ancient Greece)
- architecture as a mechanical art (medieval Western Europe)
- architecture as an art of *disegno* (Renaissance Italy)
- architecture as a fine art (eighteenth-century Western Europe)

Each definition (*technē*, mechanical art, art of *disegno*, or fine art) is an epistemological classification that includes architecture and two or more other disciplines. Kristeller's essay mentions these four definitions only briefly and does not discuss architecture in particular.⁷ Although many writers have studied architectural intentions and buildings in these historical periods, no one has focused on these definitions of architecture. There have been brief references to these classifications in publications on architecture; and brief references to architecture in publications on these classifications.⁸

By pursuing the classifications that Kristeller mentions, this book considers historical changes in the very definition of architecture. In each of the four definitions (e.g., architecture as a *technē*), the word "as" points to a larger classification where architecture is rooted during a certain period. It does not suggest a theatrical role, as if architecture were a timeless, universal discipline that can wear different masks at will. Historical definitions of architecture are not limited to four. One could also pursue *ars contemplativa* and *ars fabricandi*, for example. The four definitions in the present study are major classifications in significant historical periods.

Beyond our discipline of architecture, one of the academic contexts for this study is the history of epistemological classifications. Epistemology organizes human knowledge, usually in a hierarchic structure. When viewed from the top down, a singular, all-encompassing subject (often philosophy) is divided into a hierarchy of descending categories (e.g., fine art, science), which in turn are divided into disciplines (e.g., music, architecture). When viewed from the bottom up, many individual disciplines are assembled into a hierarchy of ascending categories, which in turn are assembled into a unified concept of knowledge. Each category (e.g., fine art) recognizes the shared properties of its disciplines (e.g., music, architecture) but disregards



Detail of epistemological diagram from Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* [1605], ed. William Aldis Wright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869).

their differences. Just as an individual member of a family is designated by two names, the identity of a discipline is based on both its individuality and the larger classification where it resides (e.g., *architecture* as a *fine art*). As we shall see, disciplines in the same epistemological category share a family resemblance but also a sibling rivalry. The concept of “discipline” comes from Latin *disciplina* ‘instruction of pupils.’⁹ It encompasses various elements of theory and practice: principles, methods, terms, practitioners, an authoritative canon, publications, courses, and communal events.¹⁰

As the history of epistemology has shown, hierarchies, levels, categories, disciplines, and subdisciplines are not timeless.¹¹ This is evident from the different classifications of knowledge in treatises and encyclopedias, as well as the different assemblies of subjects in academies and universities since 1900. At the lower levels in the hierarchy, new disciplines and alliances are frequently formed or dissolved, while the upper levels remain more constant. From ancient Rome to the Renaissance, the “liberal arts” classification (*artes liberales*), which typically included the trivium (language arts) and the quadrivium (mathematical arts), provided a stable reference for many disciplines, including architecture.¹²

Because disciplines are not timeless and universal, statements such as “Architecture is ...” and especially “Architecture has always been ...” should be qualified within historical and cultural limits to avoid projecting modern Western concepts beyond their horizon. Disciplines and classifications are rooted in particular historical periods, so they operate at a scale that is smaller than the philosophical context of Western civilization and the universal context of the human condition. As Chapter 2 will show, the ancient Greeks had no word or concept that corresponds to “architecture.” The word originated in ancient Rome. This philological detail suggests not only that the definition of architecture is variable, but that the very concept of architecture has historical limits. Therefore, attempts to define an architecture of Western civilization or an architecture of the human condition may require deeper premises than what are available to us through the word “architecture.” Conversely, the historical variability of “architecture” suggests that the future is open to new definitions – and perhaps a reconstitution of the discipline in which the word “architecture” is retired in favour of something new.

Current Elements of Practice

Another academic context for the present study is the history of architectural practice. In the modern era, three characters (designer, builder, dweller) and three things (material, drawing, building) are basic elements that mark out a conventional field of practice in architecture. Each element has particular properties and particular relations to the other elements. As Christopher Small and Lydia Goehr have shown, similar elements have marked out a

conventional field of practice in music since the eighteenth century: three characters (composer, performer, listener) and three things (sound, score, performance).

Descriptions of architecture in current publications and lectures typically emphasize two elements of practice and let the rest disappear into blind spots. Consequently, we are led to believe that designers produce buildings. This oversimplifies and distorts the field of practice. Framing the field in this narrow way promotes two beliefs: that the designer is a creator, and that the building is an aesthetic object. This has several consequences: It marginalizes the builders and the process of construction; it neutralizes the dwellers and the social program for the building; it disregards the building's materiality and earthly context; and it skips over the representations with which the design is developed. When these four other elements are recognized, the field of practice expands once again. Acknowledging that designing, building, and dwelling are gradual processes rather than timeless states is also a reminder that architecture is not just spatial but also temporal.

As Kristeller's essay shows, modern premises did not necessarily exist in earlier periods. Using modern concepts such as "designer" and "aesthetic object" to interpret architectural work in ancient Greece, for example, would misconstrue that distant field of practice. Conversely, ignoring different elements of practice in history would shrink our own horizon. Instead, this book takes a hermeneutic approach by weaving six elements of current architectural practice across those historical periods. Anachronistic juxtaposition is bound to cause ripples but also may challenge our current conventions.

The motivation for this historical study is not to pursue history as an antiquarian exercise but to understand current concepts and practices in a broader context. In music, Small, Goehr, and others present historical analyses but also critiques that question the conventional roles of the composer, performer, and listener, along with the conventional concepts of sound, score, and performance. They also question the current definition of the discipline of music and the governing concept of the musical work.

To promote comparisons among historical periods, the template of terms in the matrix below is a current "weft" that extends horizontally through the "warp" of the historical chapters. The first term defines the discipline. The next six terms are elements of practice. The final term is a governing concept that regulates those elements. These eight current terms