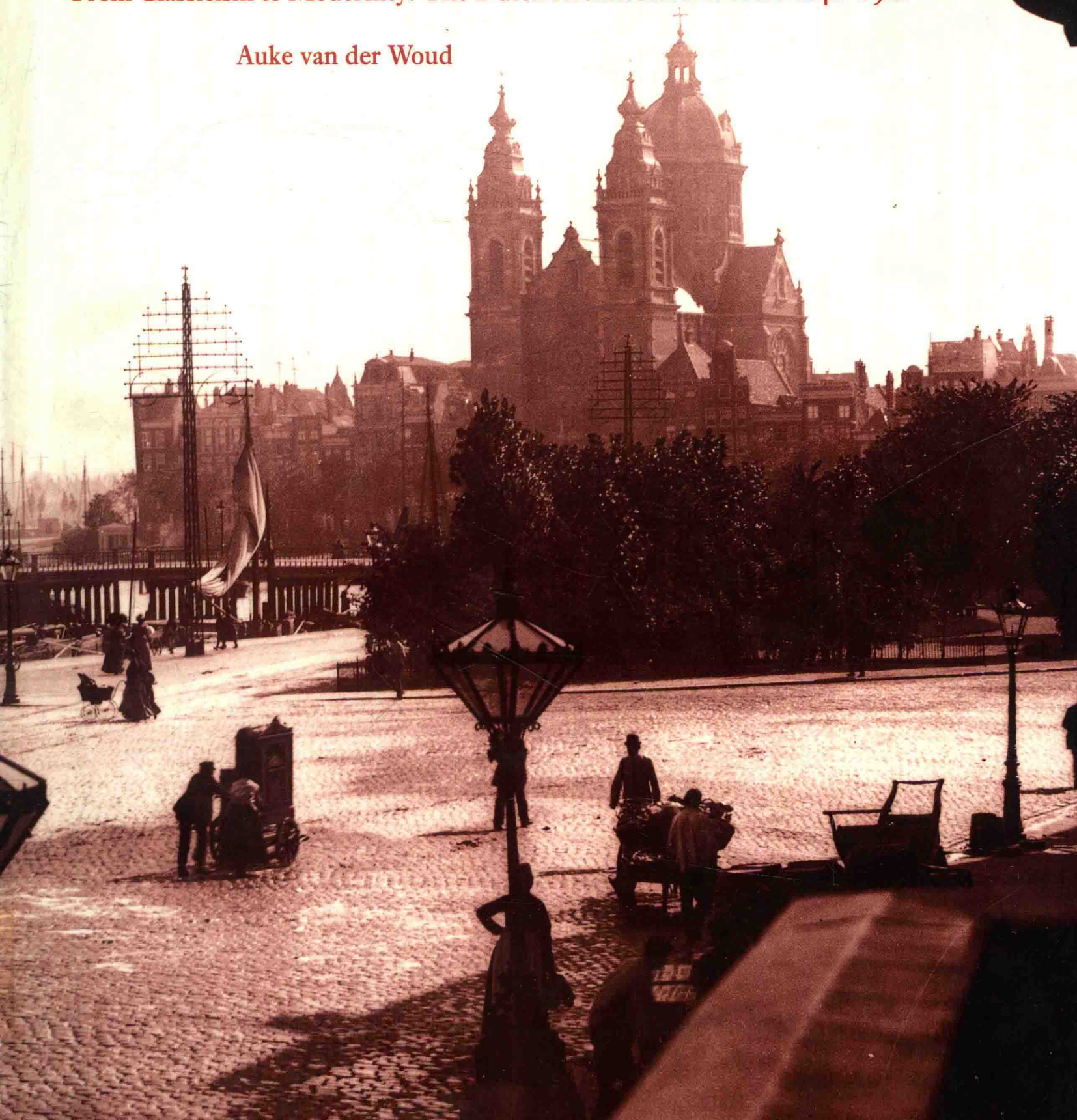


The Art of Building

From Classicism to Modernity: The Dutch Architectural Debate 1840–1900

Auke van der Woud



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The Dutch Architectural Debate
1840–1900

ASHGATE

FRONTISPIECE

Tram depot for the Amsterdam Omnibus Company, Amsterdam (by Adolf L. van Gendt, 1893), with stables for eighty-one horses and living quarters for the foreman. The art of building is a sophisticated game with complex semantics, even in a relatively simple building such as this, which incorporates the design skills of the architect and the operating efficiency of his practice, the skills of the building workers and the intentions of the client, as well as public taste, the expression of local pride, a representation of the social order, and references to 'higher' values such as nationhood, made visible by interpretations of Dutch Renaissance architecture. Photo: Jacob Olie, 1893.



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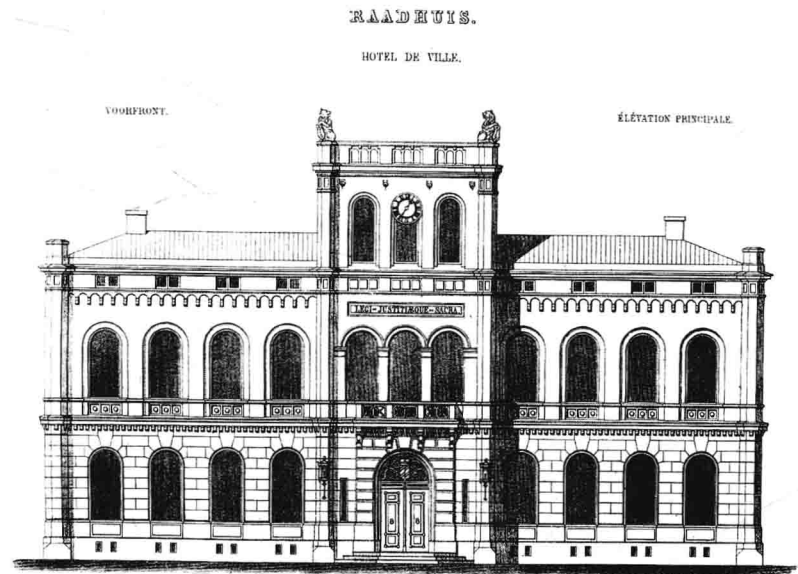
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Introduction

Building is a practice: the art of building is the subject of theory. For a long time the fundamental characteristics of European architecture had been provided by the tradition of classicism, focusing upon the five classical orders and their derivations. The eighteenth century felt the need to reinvestigate the fundamentals; to define them, by means of philosophical reasoning, as they 'really were'. In their quest for the essentials of the art of building, the architects of the nineteenth century found that philosophical reasoning was insufficient, and turned their attention to the empirical, comparative study of historic buildings. In handbooks of architectural history the conspicuous absorption of their results into nineteenth-century architecture is usually referred to as historicism; a term suggesting that history was the architect's predominant concern. In following this art-historical convention, we fail fully to take account of the fact that the problems for which architects were seeking solutions did not, in fact, belong to the past, but to their own age and to the future. The architecture of the past was, for them, not primarily a respected silent witness of a bygone era. Far more importantly, it was a representation of beauty – sometimes an unusual, strange beauty, sometimes an ideal beauty. The architecture of the past, it was generally thought, would provide study material for inquiries into the aesthetic 'laws' that, objective and universal like the laws of nature, would give the nineteenth century a splendid contemporary architecture. This last consideration had more implications than we tend to realize today. Of all the arts, the art of building was the most public, and it was its pre-eminent task – and that of the architect – to edify society by means of its beauty. Architectural theory, showing the way to realize this lofty purpose, was therefore of the utmost importance.

This book takes the importance of architectural theory as its starting point. From this viewpoint, it is not buildings and architectural design that are its subject matter, but ideas, theories, ideals, opinions, debates – precisely because ideas precede the material form. However, general cultural or political concepts do not result directly in specific architectural designs. There has to be an intermediate conceptual stage that in the following chapters I call the



'concept of form', a concept that relates cultural and political values to specific characteristics of architectural design. Classicism, for example, is such a concept of form, as are the neo-Gothic and the neo-Renaissance, and eclecticism. But the art-historical tradition of referring to these as 'styles' has not been adhered to in this book, because to use this term would be confusing in a book about debates on architectural theory. For about a hundred years 'style' did have a very wide cultural meaning, until in the late nineteenth century this was reduced by art critics to a set of common formal elements. Another reason for introducing the term 'concept of form' is to break with our habit of associating style with visual characteristics only. This has more than a theoretical significance. If one concentrates exclusively on the visual form of classicism, eclecticism or neo-Gothic architecture and on the debates on these subjects, one sees only differences and contrasts (the 'battle of the styles'). But focusing on the cultural content of these concepts of form reveals connections between them, and sometimes even unity. Many ideas

Fig. 1
A competition design for a small village town hall by Abraham Nicolaas Godefroy (1849). Godefroy's maxim was: 'The highest to which we can aspire is for our buildings to clearly convey their function to any intelligent human being.' The adjudicators praised the design for its 'character', which expressed seriousness, dignity and strength.

which were traditionally associated with classicism lived on when classicism itself no longer played a role of any importance as a design concept; and they lived on in its arch-rival, neo-Gothic architecture, in much of the neo-Renaissance (1860–1900), and even in the radical innovatory movement of the 1890s that wanted to free itself from architectural history in order to make a fresh start. All these, to differing degrees, were concerned with one cultural ideal: architecture with objective, universal aesthetic principles, nationally understood and supported – what was called *style*. It was this same ideal that in 1917 induced Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian and J.J.P. Oud to found the Dutch art group known as De Stijl.

The outsider here was eclecticism, which considered the quest for a uniform style irrelevant. It is not improbable that the reason why art historians have shown so little interest in eclecticism is precisely because of this indifference to the notion of style, and it may well be, too, that this is why they have often marginalized the subject when writing about the nineteenth century. In this book eclecticism occupies a more important position, because it sought the future of architecture not so much in aesthetic ‘laws’ but in the specific requirements of contemporary society. It not only accepted the cultural multiformity of the nineteenth century, but emphasized it and made it more explicit by means of its multiform view of concepts of form. Thus it laid the foundation for twentieth-century architecture, which would display far more individualism and multiformity as well as very much less interest in history.

Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century eclecticism was the only concept whose principles were still robustly in evidence and which enjoyed the wide support of the architectural community – and its clients. Only a few architects, who through their wealthy clients were protected against the economics of the building market, continued to maintain that the aesthetic rules of the past applied to the future, and would result in one national style. By then, the majority of architects knew better. The architectural practice of the rapidly changing nineteenth century had long since ceased to conform with aesthetic rules as expounded in books on the subject, or with aesthetic principles from the past. Also, it was evident that the quest for a generally accepted style representing the unity of the entire nation had turned out to be illusory. Back in 1840, multiformity, individualism and subjective and emotional aesthetic judgements were still very rare, the collective ideal of unity suppressing such personal forms of expression. By 1900, however, they had become ubiquitous characteristics of both social and architectural reality. Architectural theory, considered the common objective

guide for architectural design for more than half a century, had become obsolete. Architecture was still thriving, but architectural design was no longer determined by words, but more than ever by images. Images became responsible for explaining and justifying design – a tautology that was to be even more forcibly felt with the breakthrough brought about by photography after 1900.

The ideas behind this book make it necessary to devote much attention to the activities of Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934) and his presumed spiritual father, ‘the Dutch Viollet-le-Duc’, Pierre J.H. Cuypers (1827–1921). This is not only because they generated many controversies in their time and were vociferous in these controversies, but also because for many decades there has been a consensus in Dutch historiography that regards them as the father and grandfather of modern Dutch architecture. It is my contention that this consensus should be reconsidered. And the strongest arguments against it are the ideas of Cuypers and Berlage themselves, as well as the context in which these two reputations were formulated, defended and contested around 1895. Cuypers’ reputation was at that time the product of twenty-five years of continuous propaganda; Berlage was a man who lived in the past as far as his ideals on architecture and ‘style’ were concerned, and an opportunist who impressed his audience with his references to a variety of philosophers and his many – if somewhat stray – statements on modernity.*

This book considers the idea that the development of such an extensive phenomenon as architecture, with all its social ramifications, cannot be attributed to the achievements of just one or two individuals. On the contrary, it sees the activities of individual architects as not so much the cause but the expression of movements that have continuously changed the face of architecture; movements inspired by collective ideas and ideals concerning artistic representation, popular taste and fashion, the dynamics of building technology, the availability of building materials, new functional requirements and the demands of economic expansion. In fact, the situation is even more complex. It is not just a question of architects expressing those movements: there is also an essential interaction – individual architects can also *change* fashion, building technology and representational conventions, and in so doing have an effect on the building market.

* The Dutch edition of this book elaborates on some points more than seemed desirable for the English edition. This applies especially to the critical assessment of the way in which Cuypers’ and Berlage’s reputations were constructed around 1900.

What applies in this context to the relation between the individual and the architectural scene as a whole applies just as much to the relation between the national and the international. Gothic architecture was an international cultural concept that manifested itself in buildings that, in their visual characteristics, usually referred to both the international and the regional context. This also applied to nineteenth-century architecture. Dutch architects, while part of an international community, related to a 'national' public taste, a national building technology and building market, and national political and religious ideas. In a sense this was also true of London, Berlin, Paris and Vienna, and to some extent of Chicago and New York. Dutch architects read the same journals as their foreign colleagues: the writings of Karl Bötticher, Gottfried Semper, Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, and the illustrations of the buildings of Henry Hobson Richardson and the many reports of the miraculous American efficiency, made concrete certain ideas that were generally felt – consciously or unconsciously – in the Netherlands as elsewhere. The enthusiasm with which these ideas were received testifies to this.

At the same time it cannot be denied that there was an incongruity in Dutch nineteenth-century architecture as compared with foreign architecture. Architects frequently complained of the unflamboyant Dutch national character that, uninterested in monumental art, failed to provide them with the means that enabled their colleagues in the major foreign cities to apply their art in a more opulent way. The conventional theological explanation of the typical Dutch soberness is inadequate here: was it really the result of the long-established popularity of Calvinism in the Netherlands, or did Calvinism become so popular there in the sixteenth century precisely because it provided the right spiritual dimension to this national character?

The idea of beauty has a strange tradition in the Netherlands. For centuries urban design was a form of hydro-engineering, in which constructing a house could easily be compared to building a ship. A silent majority of the Dutch architects of the nineteenth century followed in this tradition: for them, visual beauty was not the result of philosophy and aesthetics, but of the visible success of technical intelligence and creativity. Beauty stood not so much for the representation of a splendid abstract ideal, but for the expression of superior functionality in a purely practical sense. The grand nineteenth-century themes discussed in this book, although earnestly considered and debated in the Netherlands, were perhaps at a fundamental level somewhat un-Dutch. They originated not from a set of traditional, pragmatic ideas, but from another

architectural culture, an idealist, intellectual tradition.

It may be that Dutch architecture was only able to make its appearance on the international stage when, shortly after 1900, it discovered how to link these two traditions. The result was there to be seen not only in the well-known contributions to the Modern Movement of such architects as J.J.P. Oud, Johannes Duiker, Willem van Tijen, W.M. Dudok and Mart Stam, but also in the rapid growth and influence of the Dutch architecture profession, especially in the field of social housing and urban and regional planning, which immediately attracted international interest. Two traditions – ambiguous results. Even today, a hundred years later, the Netherlands is a country where the leading architects fulfil a prominent cultural function, yet refuse to consider themselves artists or to discuss architectural beauty; while on the other hand, without irony or cultural pretension, locks, bridges, quays, viaducts and pedestrian subways are referred to as *kunstwerken* (works of art). With the exception of the nineteenth-century interlude that is one of the subjects of this book, Dutch architecture is not a matter of theory; it is the art of building – a matter of practice.

Preamble

Around 1900 a fundamental change took place in collective ideas about architecture, a change apparent among other things in the common parlance. The term 'art of building' was now old-fashioned, evoking nineteenth-century artistic ideals and systems in which most architects were no longer interested. 'Architecture' became the neutral, more or less technical, designation. The cause of this change must not be sought merely in the rejection of ornament, the search for a pure simplicity, or any of the other 'modern' external characteristics of architectural design. Design concepts result from ideas, and so it is those changing ideas that we should examine.

The first question to ask is how in the collective architectural mind the essence of architecture was perceived. Nineteenth-century science demonstrated that each area of empirical reality had rational and therefore knowable fundamentals which, once they had all been mapped, would reveal a system. This happened in the field of biology, economics and sociology, of health and disease, in industrial processes and technology. Was there any reason why architecture should be an exception to this universal logic? Certainly, architects recognized that like painting and sculpture it was an art, but, unlike painting and sculpture, it was also a science. To look for the fundamentals of architecture in its history was therefore as sensible, it seemed, as geologists studying the history of the earth in order to understand the geological processes of the present. And as with geologists, the historical interest of the leading architects was a means, not an aim in itself; it was, for them, the only way to discover the laws of architecture. The essential characteristic of these architects, great theorists such as Gottfried Semper and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, was that, just like geologists in *their* field, they were searching for the solution of the problem of contemporary architecture *within architecture itself*.

Towards 1900 many architects became aware that this solution could not, in fact, be found in the past. Architecture could only become contemporary if it searched for the laws, the conditions for its existence, *outside* itself. It is from that moment that architects ceased to feel the need to study the history of architecture. Rather,

they now saw themselves as detached from it. It is to eclecticism that this fundamental change in the collective thinking, this radical orientation away from the internal and towards the external relations of architecture, can be attributed.

Perhaps the metamorphosis of the art of building into architecture can be highlighted in another way. To a large extent architecture withdrew from the cultural reference system in which it had remained in the nineteenth century to make a place for itself in the technical frame of reference of the twentieth. Whereas the old system was a cultural ideal fostered by an elite, a system of values and standards that owed its authority to a respectable tradition, the new system was a source of boundless technical potential, an ideal of progress that was to be professed so universally in the twentieth century that we called it mass culture; a culture of progress, directed not by history but by expectations for the future.

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Part I

The Enlightenment Inheritance: Character, Truth and Style

Europe and the Netherlands: The Years before 1840

The common European view of the art of building held in the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century was that architectural design could not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. Design as an aim in itself was meaningless and was therefore not accepted as art. Design always referred to a specific content – was, rather, an expression of the content. Design was the means through which the content, the ‘ideal’, materialized. According to this view, a successful design of the idea would result in beauty.

In order to understand why and how design in architecture changed, we must look for changes concerning the ‘idea’ of architecture, and changes concerning the question of what is to be considered a successful design. According to long-standing tradition, beauty was art’s highest ideal; it deeply moved the observer and made him or her yearn for the loftiest human ideals. Art’s exalted social position resulted from this: through its beauty it uplifted society. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this view of architecture was hardly disputed. The debate focused not on the function of beauty, but on how beauty could be created – which rules to follow, which mistakes to avoid – and on the experience of beauty. The proliferation of architectural theories in the nineteenth century reflected the diminishing consensus on the characteristics of beauty.

Classicism required the rules of beauty to have a high degree of *objectivity*. The increasing focus on the role of the observer, which in the eighteenth century became the driving force behind the process of individualism and greater multiformity and which would terminate classicism’s supremacy, can already be discerned in the architectural theory of Claude Perrault (1613–88). In his *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des anciens* (Regulation of the Five Kinds of Columns after the Method of the Ancients, 1683) he proposed that the fixity and absoluteness of the rules of beauty derived from systems of proportion were not self-evident. He made a distinction between on the one hand ‘positive’, more or less objective, beauty, based on demonstrable characteristics of a building itself, and on the other hand ‘arbitrary’ beauty, based on the associations and habits of the observer or on the authority of the client or architect. Rules of beauty based on proportions were not

‘positive’, according to Perrault, but ‘arbitrary’, because there was no consensus on what was an ideal proportion. The perception of beautiful proportions in architecture is fundamentally different from that in music. Whereas in music even the slightest deviation from the proper relationship between tones sounds incontrovertibly out of tune, deviations in architecture are often not even noticed, and so do not detract from the experience of beauty.¹ Perrault was by no means an insignificant architect, and neither was he an anti-classicist. He published a learned and famous translation of the Roman architect Vitruvius’ *De Architectura*, and built a new colonnade on the east side of the Louvre, commissioned by Louis XIV. His *Ordonnance* demonstrates an odd characteristic that Vitruvianism continued to display until the early nineteenth century – namely, the ability to maintain its monopoly by incorporating all criticism and contrasts.

Perrault distinguished between beauty that is the result of rules similar to the laws of nature, and beauty based on convention. This dichotomy became more prominent in the course of the eighteenth century. The *genre pittoresque* in French painting and the picturesque in English landscape gardens offered the opportunity to explore – so different from classicist, ‘regulated’ art – the new beauty of the apparently unregulated, the coincidental, the ‘natural’ and the ‘naive’. This fundamental renewal in the view of art coincided with a similarly fundamental reconception of nature, which found expression in a variety of ways. The authority of nature was now pitted against the authority of Vitruvianism, resulting in new views on the rationality, functionality and aesthetics of a building in general and on structure and ornamentation in particular.

The new study of nature also implied the study of the nature of man himself. It was in philosophy, the discipline that played a primary role in the study of the as yet little understood human condition, that the study of aesthetics, concentrating on the definition, creation and experience of beauty, originated. Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), for example, studied what it is that determines beauty. His answer was that beauty comprised the primary properties of objects that can activate a feeling in relation to these objects

