

Introduction to Architectural Theory

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Key concepts, historical milestones, and foundational questions

1. What Is Architectural Theory?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A systematic set of ideas that explain <i>why</i> buildings are designed the way they are and <i>how</i> they should be understood.
Purpose	- Clarifies design intent - Guides critical analysis - Connects architecture to broader cultural, social, and technological contexts
Scope	Aesthetics, function, technology, symbolism, ethics, sustainability, and spatial experience.

2. Core Questions Architects & Theorists Ask

1. **What is a building for?** (Function, program, social need)
 2. **How should a building look?** (Form, style, visual language)
 3. **What materials and technologies are appropriate?** (Structural logic, innovation, availability)
 4. **How does a building relate to its context?** (Urban fabric, landscape, climate)
 5. **What meanings does a building convey?** (Cultural, political, symbolic)
 6. **What ethical responsibilities accompany design?** (Accessibility, sustainability, equity)
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3. Historical Overview

Period	Key Theorists & Texts	Main Ideas
Classical (5th?c.? BCE – 5th?c.?CE)	Vitruvius – <i>De architectura</i>	“Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas” (Durability, Utility, Beauty)
Renaissance	Alberti – <i>De re aedificatoria</i>	Humanist proportion, harmony, the “architect as artist”

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Period	Key Theorists & Texts	Main Ideas
Baroque & Rococo	Marcantonio Borromeo, André Félibien	Drama, movement, theatricality; architecture as spectacle
Industrial Age	Eugène Viollet-le-Durand – <i>Dictionnaire</i> ; John Ruskin – <i>The Seven Lamps of Architecture</i>	Structural rationalism vs. moral/organic criticism
Modernism (early? mid 20th?c.)	Le Corbusier – <i>Towards a New Architecture</i> ; Walter Gropius – <i>Bauhaus Manifesto</i>	Functionality, “form follows function,” universal language, machine aesthetic
Post-Modernism (late 20th?c.)	Robert Venturi – <i>Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture</i> ; Charles Jencks – <i>The Language of Post-Modernism</i>	Embrace of historic reference, irony, pluralism
Contemporary (21st?c.)	Rem Koolhaas – <i>Delirious New York</i> ; Peter Zumthor – <i>Thinking Architecture</i> ; Neri Oxman – <i>Material Ecology</i>	Hybridization, phenomenology, digital fabrication, sustainability, interdisciplinary research

4. Major Theoretical Approaches

Approach	Central Tenet	Representative Thinkers	Typical Concerns
Formalism	Architecture is primarily about visual form and composition.	Colin Rowe, Peter Eisenman	Proportion, geometry, visual rhythm
Functionalism	Form should directly express a building's program.	Louis Sullivan, Mies van der Rohe	Efficiency, clarity of use
Structural Rationalism	Truth to structure; the building's logic is revealed through its construction.	Viollet-le-Durand, Peter Smithson	Material honesty, construction method

**Phenomenology