

Introduction to Architectural Theory

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Key concepts, historical milestones, and analytical tools for understanding the built environment.

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 function socially, culturally, and materially.
Purpose	• Provide a vocabulary for critique and discussion • Guide design decisions • Connect architecture to broader intellectual currents (philosophy, politics, technology).
Scope	• Formal aesthetics (proportion, composition) • Functional logic (program, circulation) • Symbolic meaning (identity, ideology) • Environmental performance (climate, sustainability).

2. Major Historical Phases

Period	Core Ideas	Representative Thinkers / Works
Classical (c. 500?BC – 500?AD)	Order, proportion, the <i>golden ratio</i> , harmony with nature.	Vitruvius – <i>De architectura</i> ; Greek temples (Parthenon).
Medieval (c. 500?–?1500)	Symbolic geometry, liturgical function, craft guilds.	Abbot Suger (Saint?Denis); Gothic cathedrals (Chartres).
Renaissance (c. 1400?–?1600)	Revival of classical orders, humanism, perspective.	Alberti – <i>De re aedificatoria</i> ; Palladio – <i>The Four Books</i> .
Baroque (c. 1600?–?1750)	Dynamism, theatricality, complex spatial sequences.	Bernini – St. Peter’s Square; Borromini – San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.
Neoclassicism (c. 1750?–?1850)	Rationality, archaeological accuracy, civic virtue.	Ledoux – <i>The Architecture of Reason</i> ; Jefferson’s Monticello.

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Period	Core Ideas	Representative Thinkers / Works
Modernism (c. 1900?–? 1970)	Function > form, truth to materials, universal language.	Le Corbusier – <i>Five Points</i> ; Bauhaus; Mies van der Rohe – “less is more.”
Post?Modernism (c. 1970 ?–?1990)	Contextualism, irony, historical reference, pluralism.	Robert Venturi – <i>Complexity & Contradiction</i> ; Michael Graves.
Contemporary / 21st? Century (2000?–? present)	Sustainability, digital fabrication, parametricism, social equity.	Bjarke Ingels – <i>BIG</i> ; Kengo Kuma – “architecture that grows out of the ground.”

3. Foundational Concepts & Terminology

Concept	Meaning	Typical Application
Form vs. Function	Debate over whether aesthetic shape (form) or practical use (function) should dominate design.	Modernist “form follows function.”
Typology	Classification of buildings by program and spatial logic (e.g., temple, house, office).	Helps generate design precedents.
Phenomenology	Focus on lived experience—light, materiality, perception.	Works of Peter Zumthor, Juhani Pallasmaa.
Critical Regionalism	Balances global modernism with local climate, culture, and materials.	Alvaro Siza, Tadao Ando.
Sustainability & Resilience	Designing for energy	