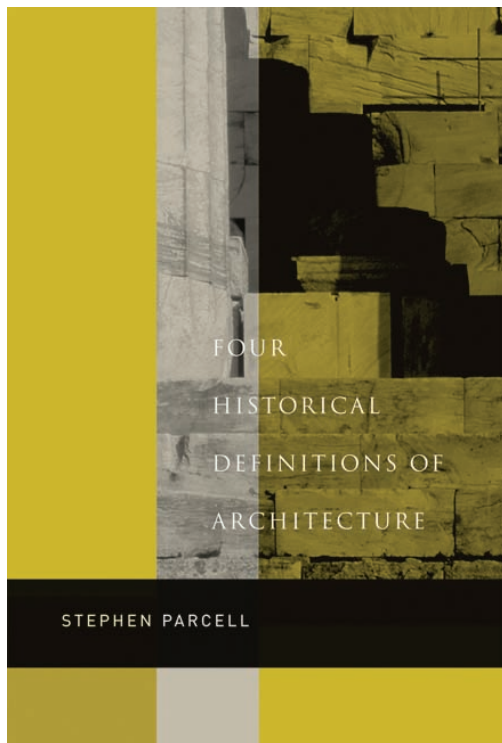# Histories Of Architecture

**FOUR HISTORICAL DEFINITIONS
OF ARCHITECTURE**
STEPHEN PARCELL
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012
338 pages, 21 figures
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Definitions, for which dictionaries alone have an obligation, contain of reality what a badly retrieved fishnet contains of the obscure and swarming life in the sea … some seaweed tangled about and some scrawny creatures waving their translucent limbs, and all sorts of snails, and bivalves. … But reality, which was a sizable fish, has, with a flip of its tail, slipped overboard.
— Remy de Gourmont[1]

With *Four Historical Definitions of Architecture* Stephen Parcell offers an ambitious trans-historical study aiming to retrieve four rather slippery definitions of architecture from four distinct but interconnected seas: 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. With such adventurous aims, Parcell may be excused for serving up definitions that are unlikely to please and persuade every reader. But quibbles aside, there is so much to learn from Parcell's rigorous manner of fishing and so much to savor from his bountiful catch, that every architectural historian and, indeed, any critically inclined lover of architectural ideas ought to take hold of this remarkably lucid work. For, although it does not dip into twenty-first century problems of architecture's definition and status, this book does provide the thought-provoking immersion necessary to understand current disciplinary questions in a broader context.

Before embarking on this ambitious journey, Parcell prepares readers by meticulously laying out (in Chapter 1) his interpretative apparatus—a kind of heuristic net of key words and concerns with which he attempts to harvest comparable elements of the architectural discipline from each wave of history. This interpretive net, in Parcell's terms, is a "matrix" consisting of a "weft" of four historical definitions of architecture—*technē*, mechanical art, *disegno*, and fine art—and a "warp" of eight interdependent elements of architectural practice: designer, builder, dweller, material, drawing, and building, as well as concepts of architecture and architectural works. Parcell's historical "weft" is borrowed from a quartet of well-rehearsed concepts in the Western tradition, as outlined in Paul Oskar Kristeller's two-part essay "The Modern System of the Arts,"[2] while his "warp" derives from an analogous set of elements definitive of musical practice, as presented in Lydia Goehr's *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*[3] and Christopher Small's *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*.[4] According to Parcell, Goehr and Small

describe music and musical works as elusive phenomena, arising from the collaborative interaction of composers, performers, listeners, sounds, the score, and the performative event. These musical elements correspond to Parcell's proposed elements of architectural practice. This appropriation of musical theory to illuminate architectural history is one of Parcell's most original contributions. With this compelling musical analogy, Parcell begins to dissolve the notion of an architectural work as a static building designed by autonomous visionaries. Further, with his method of tracking eight elements at play in each period, Parcell hopes to restore a historically informed understanding of architecture's cooperative agencies: its social, intellectual, and worldly contexts, and its material and representational processes.

In Chapters 2 through 9, Parcell proceeds to describe architecture's epistemological position in each of the four periods under study—a tricky task, since its position is in flux. Nevertheless, Parcell focuses on those significant instances and documents in which architecture's status relative to other arts may be seen to coalesce. In ancient Greece, Parcell reminds us that architects worked in a tradition of *technē* on a par with other remarkably diverse artisans: blacksmiths, potters, healers, prophets, legislators, navigators, minstrels, acrobats, cooks, and horse trainers (p. 22). In the medieval period, architecture became defined more narrowly as a protective art, a subset of armature within the mechanical arts, which also included fabric making, commerce, agriculture, hunting, medicine, and theatrics (pp. 65–69). In the Italian Renaissance, architecture became linked to painting and sculpture as an art of *disegno* (p. 105). Finally, in the eighteenth century, architecture was classified among the fine arts (*beaux-arts*), together with painting, sculpture, poetry, and music (p. 178).

As Parcell shows, these four historical groupings were neither fixed nor finite. Rather, the bonds among arts were debated and their epistemological groupings changed in response to cultural and philosophical transformations, with architecture often at risk of being ousted as a hybrid misfit. The bases of architecture's

hybridity are well known: mingling beauty with utility; pleasing the senses and the intellect; balancing public and private interests; and so forth. Yet, Parcell's inquiry moves beyond simple binaries, by elaborating each definition of architecture as a dynamic synthesis of historically specific elements. For instance, Parcell argues that dwellers were understood quite differently in each period: as a "patron" seeking to extend mortal limitations in ancient Greece; as a "body" inherently weak and desirous of divine redemption in medieval Europe; as a "citizen" seeking physical and moral well-being in the Italian Renaissance; and as a contemplative "beholder" in the eighteenth century. Similarly, the designer shifts from being a relatively anonymous bearer of ancestral tradition, to a singular "inventor" of useful devices, to an "imitator" of nature, then a "translator" of sensations. While the methodology of tracking these shifting and often overlapping concepts for each element of practice in each period can become somewhat cumbersome, the gist of the evidence rings clear: architecture is not an autonomous discipline having timeless methods and fixed boundaries of knowledge. Rather, it is vitally enmeshed with a great and fluctuating variety of humanistic and worldly concerns.

Parcell's insights are largely based on his reading of primary sources. He provides focused interpretations of Étienne-Louis Boullée's *Essai sur l'art,* Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* (mainly Book One), and Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*; while, for the Greek period, he relies on informed secondary sources. But the full breadth of his sources is impressive. He casts his net wide, quoting diverse authors from Alexander Baumgarten to Xenophon.

Often this breadth is richly rewarding. The suggestive backstory (pp. 48–70) of how the mechanical arts arose in the ninth century as a response by Johannes Scotus Eriugena to Martianus Capella's fifth century allegory, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, is a remarkable case in point. At times, however, Parcell casts his net so wide that he makes an occasional slip. For instance, contrary to Parcell's assertions (pp. 53, 96), St. Augustine, in his *Confessions,* likens God not to an *architectus,* but rather

to an *artifex* and *conditor*. Elsewhere, Parcell makes overarching statements that neglect relevant sources. For example, against his claim (p. 24), *architektonia* did indeed appear in Greek (in Biton's treatise on war machines) before *architectura* appeared in Latin. But such rare slips should not turn readers away, because, like any net pulled in from a vibrant sea, Parcell's findings (in both his main text and copious footnotes) offer many delicious tidbits, shiny gems, and strange facts that provoke further thought.

This attractive and well crafted book incorporates a variety of figures: epistemological diagrams from historical sources, including a tree diagram from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*[5] in which *architecture civile* is linked to the fine arts under the auspices of "imagination"; and several diagrams of Parcell's own devising, which impart at a glance architecture's shifting place in the classification system of each period. The book also includes imagery associated with architecture's more symbolic capacities: notably, a Greek vase painting depicting the mythological return of Hephaistos; a fifteenth-century engraving of the construction of Noah's ark; an early Renaissance coin featuring Alberti's winged eye emblem; Vasari's relief of three intertwined laurel wreaths, a tribute to Michelangelo who excelled in all three arts of *disegno*; an allegorical engraving of lady "Architecture" surrounded by laboring cherubs, found on a painted ceiling in Charles Perrault's *Le cabinet des beaux Arts*;[6] and drawings of Boullée's Cenotaph for Newton. Notwithstanding the importance of diagrams to Parcell's study, these symbolic images are arguably most effective, since, together with the questions raised by the text, they invite storytelling and musing, opening ways of thinking about architecture's definition that resist distillation to a libretto of catch-all terms.

Four Historical Definitions of Architecture will find a place on bookshelves alongside other recent studies of architecture's relation to language and the arts, including Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings*,[7] Joseph Rykwert's *Judicious Eye: Architecture Against the Other Arts*,[8] and Hal Foster's *Art-Architecture*

Complex.[9] Chapters of Parcell's book will also be read in history and theory seminars together with essays treating the extensions, limits and depths of the discipline, such as Anthony Vidler's "Architecture's Expanded Field,"[10] and David Leatherbarrow's "Architecture is its own Discipline."[11] Yet, Parcell's work adds two critical insights: first, architecture has *always* been part of an expanded field; and, second, some of the most useful ways to critically re-conceptualize and meaningfully re-negotiate that field may come from a reinterpretation of pre–eighteenth-century sources. In this new century, when architecture is again striving to define its place, Parcell's study is well timed to help us consider afresh the premises and contingencies of its discipline and practice.

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Notes
1. Remy De Gourmont, *Selected Writings*, trans. Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 46.
2. Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics, Part 1," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (1951): 496-527; "Part 2," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13, no. 1 (1952): 17-46.
3. Lydia Goehr, *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
4. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).
5. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (Paris: Briasson, 1751–80).
6. Charles Perrault, *Le cabinet des beaux Arts* (Paris: G. Edelinck, 1690).
7. Adrian Forty, *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
8. Joseph Rykwert, *The Judicious Eye: Architecture Against the Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
9. Hal Foster, *Art-Architecture Complex* (New York: Verso, 2011).
10. Anthony Vidler, "Architecture's Expanded Field," *Artforum* 42, no. 8 (2004): 142–147.
11. David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture Is Its Own Discipline," in *The Discipline of Architecture*, edited by Andrew Piotrowski and Julia Robinson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) , 83–102.

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