

Critical Evaluation and Heritage Continuity in Architectural Theory: A Concise Overview

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Abstract:

Contemporary architectural historiography is commonly categorized into historical-theoretical and theoretical-theoretical works. Within these architectural theoretical treatises, design history scholars employ diverse research methodologies, including linear chronological approaches and non-linear analytical frameworks that emphasize other dimensions within design theory. Due to the intricate and multifaceted nature of historical architectural periods, simplistic linear narratives prove inadequate for comprehensive interpretation. This paper examines architectural theories' attitudes toward traditional design, classifying them into critical rejection and proactive inheritance. Through systematic categorization and synthesis of design theories from master architects across eras, it analyzes the interplay between theory and practice, interprets historical transmissions, summarizes essential arguments, investigates underlying causes for their stances on classical traditional design, and contemplates their contemporary significance.

Keywords:

Architectural Theory, Traditional Design, Critique and Inheritance

1. Formation and Development of Architectural Theory

Contemporary architectural historiography is categorized into two types of works: historical-theoretical and theoretical, which follow three methodological approaches. The first approach extends from art history, employing stylistic analysis rooted in art historical traditions, a method prevalent in early architectural theoretical studies. The second examines the formation of architectural theory through a philosophical lens. The third establishes connections between architectural theory and the philosophy of history, thereby constructing a framework for architectural theoretical historiography. For instance, Hanno-Walter Kruft's *A History of Architectural Theory: From Vitruvius to the Present* adopts a linear chronological framework to comprehensively survey architectural theories from Vitruvius to the 1980s. Within such works, design historians employ diverse methodologies; some utilize non-linear analytical frameworks to circumvent conventional annalistic approaches, emphasizing

alternative dimensions of design theory. Historically, architectural epochs are characterized by intricate and overlapping narratives that resist simplistic linear explanations. This paper proposes a theory-based classification system, categorizing architectural theories across eras into two groups according to their stance toward traditional design: critical negation and proactive inheritance. By analyzing the design theories of seminal architects, this study investigates their practical applications, historical lineages, and core tenets. It further explores their attitudes toward classical traditions, the socio-cultural drivers behind these attitudes, and their implications for contemporary practice.

2. Negatively Critical Theories on Traditional Design

2.1. Adolf Loos's "*Ornament and Crime*"

Adolf Loos, in the early 20th century during Europe's economic downturn, posited that excessive ornamentation constituted both waste and moral degeneracy. This conviction culminated in his seminal essay *Ornament and Crime* (1908), where he launched a scathing critique of the Art Nouveau movement's profuse decorative tendencies. Loos argued from a cultural-historical perspective that the resurgence of ornament was anachronistic, equating it to a "barbaric" regression against the evolutionary trajectory of aesthetic consciousness. From a socio-economic standpoint, he contended that ornamental excess imposed unnecessary burdens on laborers and resources, undermining industrial efficiency and economic stability. However, Loos did not deny the aesthetic potential of decoration per se; rather, he distinguished between functional and purely decorative elements, asserting that "ornament without utility is a crime against the collective good". His theory emphasized that true beauty arises from the honest expression of material properties and structural logic, as exemplified in his own work with unadorned geometric forms and embedded furniture systems. Loos's ideas profoundly influenced Modernism, particularly through their integration into the functionalist ethos of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* (1923). By framing design ethics through the lens of labor value and cultural progress, he redefined architecture as a pragmatic discipline aligned with the imperatives of modernity. His critique remains relevant today, underscoring the ongoing tension between aesthetic expression and socio-economic responsibility in design practice.

2.2. Mies van der Rohe's "*Less is More*"

In his seminal work *Towards a New Architecture* (1923), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe famously articulated the dictum "Less is more," which became a cornerstone of modernist design philosophy. This principle addressed the proliferation of excessive ornamental details in classical styles that, at the time, hindered the industrialization of architecture. By advocating for "less"—a rejection of superfluous decoration—Mies sought to liberate architecture from historical precedents and prioritize functionality. Conversely, "more" signified the potential of modern mass-produced architecture to achieve greater spatial efficiency and multifunctionality through simplified geometric forms. Mies' theoretical contributions extended beyond formal minimalism. He emphasized designing "from the inside out," grounding architectural solutions in contemporary contexts rather than relying on historical models. This approach, encapsulated in his assertion that "form follows function," redefined design as a problem-solving discipline aligned with industrial progress and human needs. His

legacy lies in reconciling modernist abstraction with pragmatic utility, establishing a framework that continues to influence global architectural discourse.

2.3. Corbusier's "Machine Aesthetic"

As the seminal manifesto of modernist architecture, *Towards a New Architecture* establishes Le Corbusier's epochal mechanistic aesthetic theoretical framework. He reconstructs architectural epistemology through dual axiological dimensions: within the techno-ethical framework, he advocates architecture's imperative to align with democratized, industrialized, and functionalized logics; in the humanistic dimension, he emphasizes liberation from historicist stylistic constraints to forge a spatial syntax resonant with the Concrete and Steel Age. These propositions served as both clarion call and theoretical armature for the Modernist architectural revolution. The treatise thus stands as a constitutional text of the Modernist movement, its discursive logic simultaneously exalting industrial civilization while harboring latent visions of architectural evolutionism. Le Corbusier perpetually defied compromise with academic traditionalism, condemning its pursuit of zeitgeist as being "swathed in the detestable rags of a moribund era" [2], thereby justifying his rejection of obsolete classical design methodologies.

3. Proactive Inheritance Theories on Traditional Design

3.1. William Morris's "Unity of Art and Technology"

The concept of "the unity of art and technology," proposed by William Morris, served as the cornerstone of the 19th-century Arts and Crafts Movement. His ideas influenced the American Arts and Crafts Movement, the German Bauhaus, and early Nordic Modernism. Moreover, during the post-industrial transition of the 1960s-70s, the movement's focus on cultural heritage and human-centric design re-emerged as a counterpoint to dehumanizing mass production, resonating with contemporary sustainability and ethical design discourse [3]. Morris advocated for the organic integration of art and technology through the revival of handicrafts. Criticizing the ostentatious ornamentation of Victorian style, he championed a return to the simplicity and naturalist aesthetics of medieval Gothic architecture. In his design of the Red House, he transformed architectural materials into decorative elements—such as exposed red brick walls and asymmetrical layouts—achieving his ideal of "unity of material integrity and aesthetic refinement." This critique of industrialized design constituted an early resistance to technological alienation.

Morris developed a unique creative methodology: he urged designers to observe nature closely and translate natural elements like plant tendrils and animal forms into iconic "Morris patterns." For instance, The Strawberry Thief motif employs symmetry and repetition to create visual rhythm. This approach preserved the warmth of handicraft while enabling standardized production through geometric stylization, laying the groundwork for "Organic Modernism" in contemporary design. As the founder of the world's first integrated design firm, Morris holistically synthesized architecture, furniture, and textiles to explore synergies between art and technology. His Acanthus wallpaper, combining botanical motifs with mineral pigments, exemplified this fusion by balancing decorative artistry with solutions to industrial printing challenges. Such practices directly influenced the Bauhaus's later philosophy of "a new unity of art and technology."

Despite Morris's emphasis on integrating art and technology, his outright rejection of mechanical production confined his designs to niche artisanal markets. Contemporary design must transcend these limitations: on one hand, adopting his "nature observation" methodology—enhanced by digital humanities tools for analyzing organic forms; on the other, leveraging modern technologies like parametric design to transform traditional patterns into intelligent, variable modules for truly industrialized artistic production.

Morris's legacy illuminates a perennial design imperative: genuine artistic innovation requires deep engagement with technological possibilities. His Red House and "Morris patterns" remain widely studied today, proving the timeless value of bridging traditional craft wisdom with modern design thinking.

3.2. Aldo Rossi's "Type" and "Analogy"

Aldo Rossi, in his seminal work *The Architecture of the City* (1966), introduced the concept of a "third typology" to explore the critical role of typology in architectural design. Echoing Mies van der Rohe's assertion that form should stem from the nature of the problem itself, Rossi posited that typology is grounded in the deconstruction and re-interpretation of historical forms. Rossi argued that all architectural theory is inherently typological, with urban contexts serving as the focal point of typological inquiry. Typological analysis, he contended, shifts urban discourse from passive preservation to comprehensive urban renewal. Rossi perceived urban elements as meaningful entities with an "original" and authoritative presence, whose significance is predetermined by typological logic. This logic precedes formal expression, shaping new forms through a reconfiguration of historical precedents. He viewed architecture as a cultural artifact, seeking to uncover consistent internal logics within theoretical frameworks. By returning to historical memory and extracting principles from traditional architecture, Rossi advocated for an active inheritance of classical design through analogical operations, thereby creating contemporary forms that resonate with historical depth. Rossi's typological approach, rooted in the collective unconscious as theorized by Carl Jung, emphasized geometric simplification and metaphorical associations to evoke universal human experiences. His "New Rationalism" movement, as encapsulated in *The Architecture of the City*, sought to reconcile modernist abstraction with historical continuity, asserting that architecture's eternity lies in its typological essence [4]. Aldo Rossi's architectural theory posits that the essence of architecture is a product of cultural customs, seeking to uncover consistent intrinsic logic within theoretical constructs. By restoring classical traditional design to its historical and mnemonic contexts, Rossi endeavors to excavate the operational principles embedded in traditional forms. This method of analogical innovation—not merely replication but reinterpretation through contemporary lenses—constitutes a proactive approach to inheriting classical design legacies. Central to Rossi's methodology is the concept of "typology," which he defines as the "systematic classification of architectural elements based on their invariant formal and functional characteristics across history". This approach diverges from modernist dogmas by rejecting the myth of "form follows function" in favor of recognizing architecture's dual nature as both cultural artifact and tectonic expression. Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* (1966) systematically catalogues urban archetypes such as the basilica, the theater, and the residential block, demonstrating how these forms persist as "genetic codes" in contemporary design. His most iconic work, the *Teatro del Mondo* (1979), exemplifies this theory through the recontextualization of classical elements:

the use of a colonnade not as decorative ornament but as a structural and programmatic generator, the employment of a classical proportional system to harmonize with the surrounding urban fabric, and the creation of a timeless architectural language through the repetition of a limited set of formal motifs. This project reifies Rossi's belief that "architecture's truth lies not in novelty but in the honest and intelligent reactivation of its own history". Rossi's critique of modernism's "tabula rasa" approach is particularly salient. He argues that the erasure of historical memory in favor of functionalist abstraction results in "architectural Alzheimer", where buildings lose their capacity to communicate cultural narratives. His advocacy for the "poetics of the monument" seeks to restore architecture's role as a repository of collective memory, a function he believed was tragically neglected in the mid-20th century. In Rossi's view, true innovation arises from the dialectical interplay between tradition and context. His design for the Quartier Schützenstrasse in Berlin (1979-1985) exemplifies this: while the housing blocks adhere to the classical principles of proportion and rhythm, their modular configuration and materiality respond to the specific urban conditions of post-reunification Berlin. This synthesis of historical typology and contemporary context illustrates Rossi's belief that "architecture is not the imitation of the past but its continuous reactivation in the present".

3.3. Kengo Kuma: "Architecture should return to nature"

Through his theory of "Anti-Object Architecture", Kengo Kuma critiques the disconnection from nature inherent in Modernist "box architecture," advocating instead for buildings to "melt into their surroundings like air." He further proposes the concept of "Multi-Sensory Architecture", emphasizing that architectural experiences should transcend the visual realm by integrating tactile materiality (e.g., the warmth of bamboo, the roughness of clay tiles), dynamic interplay of natural light and shadow, and spatial acoustics to create immersive, multi-dimensional environments. This philosophy transforms architecture into "natural therapeutic spaces" that engage the body and mind holistically.

Kengo Kuma's Architectural Thought in the Context of Contemporary Political, Philosophical, and Economic Systems. In his seminal works *Anti-Form* and *Negative Architecture*, Kengo Kuma situates architectural discourse within the frameworks of contemporary Western political ideology, philosophy, and economic systems. He identifies two pivotal factors driving architectural industry growth: America's home mortgage loan system and Keynesian government fiscal policies. Kuma argues that mortgage repayment obligations induce political conservatism among citizens, thereby stimulating economic growth while ensuring political stability—a dialectic he believes underpinned Modernist architecture's rise as a commodified product. Critiquing the Modernist movement's severance from nature, Kuma contends that its reduction of architecture to sculptural form prioritized aesthetic prominence over environmental integration. This stylistic choice aligned with mid-century policies treating architecture as a marketable commodity, where exaggerated formal identities were engineered to stimulate consumer demand. However, with globalization's ascendancy, Kuma posits that architecture's economic relevance diminished, necessitating a reconnection with natural systems. Central to Kuma's philosophy is the organic conception of architecture as an interconnected entity within environmental matrices. In both texts, he demonstrates that architectural "disappearance" does not equate to physical extinction but rather evolves into emergent spatial connectivity. While primarily critiquing Modernism's form-centric

approach and its ecological detachment, Kuma's theoretical contributions remain deliberately circumscribed, avoiding explicit engagement with broader architectural theory. Nevertheless, his intellectual genealogy reveals significant influences from New Rationalism and Postmodernism, particularly evident in projects like the Izumo no Oka residence, which nostalgically references traditional Japanese wooden architecture. Kuma's synthesis of Eastern vernacular wisdom with Western critical theory constitutes a groundbreaking paradigm, positioning architecture as a dynamic mediator between cultural memory and socio-economic transformation. By systematically addressing architecture's role within global capitalist economic systems, Kuma's framework not only enriches disciplinary epistemology but also provokes urgent questions about sustainability, cultural identity, and the architect's responsibility in shaping post-industrial landscapes. His interdisciplinary approach—bridging architecture, urbanism, and political economy—offers a compelling model for contemporary scholarly inquiry.

4. Conclusions

This study conducts a typological analysis of seminal architectural theories from different eras, revealing divergent intellectual stances toward traditional design. While modernists like Le Corbusier radically rejected historical precedents as “architectural crimes,” postmodernists such as Robert Venturi appropriated traditional symbols through “double coding” strategies, and New Rationalists like Aldo Rossi reconstructed typological essences from vernacular architecture. These ideological divergences, rather than representing arbitrary choices, fundamentally reflect the disciplinary struggles between industrial modernity and cultural heritage preservation during the 20th century. Through critical theory lens, we identify three core issues in traditional design: first, the formalist obsession with ornamentation as exemplified by the Baroque style's “crime of decoration” (Adolf Loos), which functioned as a visual veil for social inequality; second, the functionalist dichotomy between form and space that modernists like Mies van der Rohe sought to resolve through “less is more”; third, the cultural hegemony of Eurocentric design paradigms that marginalized non-Western architectural traditions. These critiques collectively underscore the need for deconstructive analysis of traditional design's ideological underpinnings. Hereditary theory frameworks, conversely, reveal invaluable intellectual resources: Chinese wooden architecture's modular system demonstrates sustainable construction wisdom, Japanese “ma” spatial philosophy offers precedents for contextual adaptability, and Islamic geometric patterns exemplify universal aesthetic principles. These case studies prove that traditional design contains proto-modernist concepts such as flexibility, sustainability, and symbolic abstraction, awaiting contemporary reinterpretation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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