REVIEW

Time and Architecture in Premodern Italy: A Review of Marvin Trachtenberg's *Building-In-Time*

Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion, Marvin Trachtenberg, New Haven: Yale University Press, xxvi + 490 pages, 120 color and 200 b/w illustrations, 2010, ISBN: 9780300165920

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In this significant book, Marvin Trachtenberg constructs a new theory for understanding the structural and operational temporalities of building which gave rise to the monumental constructions of medieval and Renaissance Italy. As the title suggests, Trachtenberg calls this process 'building-in-time'. The development of premodern architecture 'in-time' refers not only to the prolonged realization of the building scheme, but also to the evolving nature of the physical structure itself. Divided into nine substantial chapters, *Building-in-Time* begins at the bedrock, and systemically proceeds brick by brick to elucidate the sociocultural conditions which fostered a system of mutable architecture design, and how this system gradually shifted with the onset of the modern age. Trachtenberg's method combines formal analysis, literary criticism, theory, and cultural history. The extensive illustrations, which feature many of the author's own photographs, as well as architectural plans and digitally rendered diagrams, enrich the analysis. While Trachtenberg's methodical organization facilitates selective review, a cover-to-cover reading is necessary to fully appreciate the complex, synchronic structure of building-in-time and how this concept illuminates the longer history of Western architecture.

Leon Battista Alberti, whose *De Re Aedificatoria* outlined the first theory of immutable architecture design ('building-outside-time'), stands at the center of Trachtenberg's story. Following the lead of Anthony Grafton, Joseph Rykwert, and Franklin Toker (among others), Trachtenberg recognizes Alberti's proposal for the architect-as-author as exemplifying the theoretical model of the modern, professional architect. Yet, as Trachtenberg emphasizes, the autonomous Albertian architect, who provided the comprehensive building design but stood at arm's length from its execution, was completely antithetical to traditional practice. Moreover, Trachtenberg argues that Alberti has been unduly celebrated for his conception of the modern professional. Alberti, more humanist than architect, was merely the agent of a greater, epistemic shift. Trachtenberg, whose implicit and at times even explicit criticism

of Alberti runs throughout the book, emphasizes the author's limited understanding of building at the time he wrote *De Re Aedificatoria*. According to Trachtenberg, Alberti's no-change approach to architecture was 'superficial' and 'irrational', and so impractical that Alberti himself could not even follow its principles in practice.

Building-in-Time opens not in the premodern world, but in the twenty-first century. Highly attuned to the concepts of temporal and architectural relativity, Trachtenberg claims that the reader must first overcome ingrained modern ideas about time and architecture before he can truly understand premodern building processes. Accordingly, chapters one and two provide a substantial elucidation on the philosophy of time, architectural temporality, the development of time consciousness, and what Trachtenberg calls 'chronopobia' in the early modern period. This discussion lays the ground-work for understanding Alberti's radical, atemporal vision of architecture, the topic of chapter three. Here, Trachtenberg masterfully parses *De Re Aedifactoria* within a framework of literary and intellectual history, showing Alberti's complex treatment of time and architecture to be fundamentally linked to humanist literary ideals.[1]

Trachtenberg's concept of building-in-time, the uncodified theory of premodern architecture in which design and building processes were contemporaneous and continually evolving, stands at the heart of the book (chapters four, five, and six). This elastic and highly pragmatic system of architectural production was rooted in pervasive social and political structures, and is explained by Trachtenberg in terms of the four interlinked principles of continuous re-design, myopic progression, concatenation, and retrosynthesis. 'Continuous redesign' was a fundamental condition of all architecture, and by this principle, no design or structure was ever definitive or complete. The second principle, 'myopic progression', provided responsive resolutions to the gradual development of the building and the changing expectations for its design. 'Concatenation' allowed for structured change by linking each step of the building process within a unified chain. The formal evolution of the structure was controlled by the final principle of 'retrosynthesis', whereby each phase of the building process was conceived in accordance

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with a plan for a coherent whole. In a selective review of examples, mostly taken from Renaissance Tuscany, Trachtenberg demonstrates how these four analytic concepts elucidate premodern architectural processes. The nearly three-hundred-year development of the Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa, for example, is shown to exemplify the processes of concatenate design and retrosynthesis. The lucid geometries, polychrome richness, and formal harmony of the Duomo, Tower, and Baptistery, often cited as a standard of architectural group-relationships, are reframed by Trachtenberg as the extraordinary product of building-in-time (235–239).

Trachtenberg's theory also sheds light upon the ambiguous role of the premodern architect, who followed no standard course of training, and was designated 'architect' only when he was actively involved in a building project. As Trachtenberg explains, the inherent instability and *longue durée* construction of premodern architecture promoted a different kind of architect. In order to build the campanile of Florence, for example, the worksite required not an all-knowing technical master, but someone with cultural authority and the conceptual design skills to oversee the structure as it progressed to the next stage of development. Thus it was not surprising that Giotto, 'the world's most famous painter', was named architect of the campanile, even though he had little or no prior experience in construction (275). In the era of building-in-time, the architect was only a temporary project manager, and could never have absolute control over the evolution of the building.

The variable status of the premodern architect provides the theoretical foundation for chapters seven and eight, in which Trachtenberg examines the link between Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti. In an absorbing narrative, grounded in a close reading of Antonio Manetti's *Vita* of Brunelleschi and a deft analysis of the architect's two-decade-long involvement with Florentine Duomo, Trachtenberg presents Brunelleschi as an exemplary, self-fashioning architect. By pervasively engaging the processes of building-in-time, Brunelleschi succeeded in launching himself from a position of relative anonymity to become, after the fact, the acclaimed *auctor* of the Florentine Duomo. Thus, Trachtenberg argues it was actually Brunelleschi, not Alberti, who supplied the model for the modern author-architect. Only it was Alberti, having witnessed the rise of the Duomo and Brunelleschi's ensuing celebrity, who wrote the theory. By dedicating *Della Pittura* to Brunelleschi, Alberti critically engaged the architect's image, implicitly linking himself to the extraordinary cupola design and its author. Trachtenberg further claims that Alberti later came to distance himself from Brunelleschi, next to whom his own architectural undertakings would always pale (at least in Trachtenberg's view).[2] The irony of this story — the idea that Brunelleschi, a paragon of elastic, retrosynthetic architecture, provided the inspiration for Alberti's theory of immutable architectural design — underscores the profoundly transitional nature of premodern architecture. As Trachtenberg rightly emphasizes, architectural practices in this period remained highly variable. There was no distinction between the primary and secondary phases of building; all design was redesign.

In his final chapter, Trachtenberg looks beyond Alberti, Brunelleschi, and the Quattrocento. Highlighting the piazza S.S. Annunziata in Florence and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he demonstrates how building-in-time continued to dominate architectural practices into the sixteenth century.[3] Trachtenberg argues that the deeply entrenched practices of prolonged, mutable architectural design, although variable, gave rise to almost all European monumental building well into the early modern era. Building-in-time, therefore, is central to Trachtenberg's appeal for a revisionist view of medieval and Renaissance architecture. Far from illogical and haphazard, he asserts, building processes in these periods were based on the same pragmatic, evolutionary design methods that continued to define architecture into the nineteenth century.

By providing a unifying framework for this wide spectrum of architecture, *Building-in-Time* encourages new and productive ways for thinking about building practices and the socio-temporal systems in which architecture is constructed, measured, and represented. Although the book's protagonists — Brunelleschi and Alberti — are fifteenth-century Italian architects, Trachtenberg's theory is applicable to a variety of time periods and fields of Western architectural history. Despite the book's difficult, at times abstruse, lexicon — terms such as 'crypto Albertianism', 'authoricity', 'chronophobia', and 'retrosynthesis' — the discussion of the architectural temporality and how this colors our perception of history is particularly valuable. Trachtenberg's insistence that historians forgo their obsessive search for the building's 'original design', and instead embrace a more temporally inclusive reading of architecture, is liberating. Moving beyond indefinite debates of attribution, Trachtenberg's theory enables the scholar to draw more meaningful conclusions about building processes and how architecture evolved in response to social and cultural developments. The book should be of especial value for young scholars, who will find in *Building-in-Time* a new set of analytical concepts for furthering the study of architectural history.

Notes

[1] Trachtenberg relates Alberti's proposal for 'building-outside-time' to the strong chronophobic sentiment of fifteenth-century humanism. This was rooted in Petrarch's theoretical program for the literary author, who through fame could cheat death and achieve immortality. Trachtenberg similarly understands fear of time, and anxiety of the passage of time, to be fundamental components of modern architectural practice and architectural history.

[2] Trachtenberg underscores Alberti's Petrarchan obsession with authorial fame and with writing as the principal means to achieve fame and to gain immorality. Alberti's initial reliance on Brunelleschi as a model and means to gain cultural authority, and his subsequent 'burial' of Brunelleschi, is also explained as an example of Harold Bloom's theory of 'anxiety of influence'.

³ Considering St. Peter's as a singular example of continuous redesign, Trachtenberg expands upon Howard Burns' analysis of Michelangelo's 'building against time', focusing on what about the great church plan made it so conducive to incessant modification. See Burns (1995).

References

Burns, Howard 1995 Building Against Time: Renaissance Strategies to Secure Large Churches Against Changes in Their Design. In Jean Guillaume (ed.), *L'église dans l'architecture de larenaissance.* Paris: Éditions Picard. pp. 107–132.