

Kenneth Frampton

Fourth edition

modern architecture



A CRITICAL HISTORY

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To my parents

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Preface to the Fourth Edition

A disturbing Eurocentric bias has been evident in almost all the received histories of modern architecture, from Gustaf Adolf Platz's *Die Baukunst der neuesten Zeit* of 1927 to Reyner Banham's *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* of 1960, to which this account has always been indebted. Despite the ideological discretion with which both Platz and Banham managed to exclude from their titles any mention of either architecture or modernity, they would nonetheless both become party to that polemical historiographic tradition that the Marxist historian Manfredo Tafuri characterized as 'operative', that is to say, as ideologically instrumental. In this regard it has to be conceded that the latest edition of this work remains as operative as ever, with all the arbitrary weakness that this entails.

The limitations of this approach become increasingly evident as we are thrown into the modernizing vortex of the 21st century, since the global production of architecture, irrespective of any intrinsic quality, far exceeds the critical overview of any single observer, notwithstanding his or her imaginary detachment. This aporia is greatly exacerbated by the fact that technological modernization has become an irreversible fate, more a corollary of the climatological 'tipping-point' than a 250-year-old liberative legacy dating back to the Enlightenment. The progressive aspirations of this tradition could still be received by each successive generation until the apocalyptic breaks that occurred in the middle of the last century – one thinks of the Third Reich's genocide and the all but gratuitous demonstration of nuclear weaponry.

These instrumental aberrations that continue to haunt us on a global scale, plus the historical failure of socialism, now seem to cast a long shadow over the trajectory of the new – above all over the social democratic promise of the welfare state as opposed to the current triumph of market-driven modernization, which under the aegis of globalized capitalism is virtually devoid of any kind of ameliorative aim. Transnational corporate ascendancy and the decline of the nation state have put into serious question what we can possibly mean by the term 'modern' today, or even the vexed word 'critical', given the ever-expanding 'value-free' domain of digital technology and the Pandora's box of a new nature brought into being by the

widespread application of genetic modification.

Herein lies the paradox confronting the architecture of our time, for while techno-science in the form of digitally driven environmental and structural engineering takes the art of building to an entirely new level of cultural sophistication, this seemingly positive potential tends to be vitiated by our lack of any overarching vision beyond the perpetuation of a consumerist waste economy upon which our continual accumulation of maldistributed wealth fatally depends. In this manner Jürgen Habermas's 'unfinished modern project', to which this critical history is ostensibly addressed, is undermined by the techno-political void lying at the very heart of the late modern world. As Marx prophesied with such authority in the middle of the 19th century, 'All that is solid melts into air.' Thus the radical democratic moment is eviscerated by our somnambulist failure to envisage any alternative to the self-perpetuating cycle of production and consumption, with which, in the last analysis, architecture has nothing in common.

Such, then, is the standpoint from which the last chapter of the fourth edition has been written, along with the vain aspiration to give a balanced account of the last twenty years of architectural production. Despite the adoption of a six-part structure as a kind of critical taxonomy, which in the event would prove to be as indispensable as it was arbitrary, I cannot claim that the inclusions and exclusions are in any sense objective, although I have attempted to set this selection against a wide background of environmental and demographic changes that are transforming the late modern world with a velocity that is unprecedented.

What, then, can the role of architecture be under such unpropitious social circumstances? Surely we can respond only provisionally in the name of a critical creativity that recognizes here and there a work of quality to stand against the placelessness of the megalopolis; to occupy a momentary gap, so to speak, in the consumerist closure of the late modern world, where a space of public appearance may still be evoked in the name of a project that remains as yet unrealized.

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Kenneth Frampton

multi-storey city hall into the medieval fabric of Murcia in 1998. And what is true of Moneo also applies to the careers of many other Spanish architects who have been engaged over the past two decades in generating an exceptional spectrum of civic buildings, from the Usera Library, Madrid, by Abalos and Herreros, to Francisco Mangado's Baluarte Auditorium completed on a trapezoidal site in the centre of Pamplona, both works dating from 2003. **Among the more accomplished civic structures to be completed in Spain in recent years is a small public library in the Madrid suburb of Villanueva de la Cañada, realized to the designs of Churtichaga and Quadra-Salcedo in the same year. Here, the open book stacks have been treated as a spiralling street-space, the ramped floors and walls of which are built of reinforced brickwork by way of a homage to the work of Eladio Dieste.**

The National Library of Quebec in Montreal, built to the designs of Patkau Architects in 2005 and clad in horizontal panels of green glass, is yet another instance of a public library being handled as a spiralling micro-urban volume. In this instance reading rooms step up across the transverse section of a six-storey slab to afford a 'browsing promenade' that may be short-

412 Meier, City Hall, The Hague, 1995. View of Galleria.



circuited at one's convenience by a central glazed elevator core connecting the main levels.

An all but anachronistic sense of *civitas* on a heroic urban scale is to be found in the work of the Berlin architects Axel Schultes and Charlotte Frank, most notably in their winning Spreebogen competition entry of 1993. The scheme assumed the form of a *temenos* – a strip of federal buildings to be known as the 'Band des Bundes' – initially projected as the administrative centre of a reunified Germany four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The Wall had hitherto divided not only East and West Berlin, but also, on a global scale, the democratic West from the Communist East. The Schultes–Frank entry for this international competition was the only scheme to capture the urbanistic and symbolic importance of the site, in terms both of the history of the previous half-century and of the way in which this void in the heart of the city had served repeatedly as the context for tragically contrasting conceptions of Germany's destiny. Examples range from Otto March's imperialistically Neo-Classical Königsplatz proposal of 1912, following the very same axis as the Schultes–Frank scheme, to Albert Speer's megalomaniacal *Generalbauinspektion* axis of 1935, running north–south across the city so as to cut the Spreebogen site in half and culminate in the colossal Volkshalle of the Third Reich (which was envisaged as ten times the size of the Pantheon in Rome). In contrast, the Schultes–Frank *temenos* was a symbolic reinstatement of democracy and a categorical repudiation of both Speer's megalomaniacal axis and the totalitarianism of the Soviet empire.

Out of this proposal came the architects' German Chancellery, completed in 2001 as a partial realization of their original scheme, the full extent of which will not now be realized – a regrettable circumstance given the representational status of the building, remarkable not only for its vivacity but also for the lightness of its Neo-Baroque manner, executed in concrete and painted white. Defying convention, the architects chose to represent the German state through an allusion to the scale and deportment the Ali Qapu palace in Isfahan. Bounded by five-storey ministerial offices to the north and south, this central pavilion faces eastwards onto a *cour d'honneur* and westwards onto the Spree River. Patently

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Kenneth Frampton

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Fourth edition

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