Reviews

MARVIN TRACHTENBERG
*Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti
and Modern Oblivion*
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Art and architectural historians have been
stepping out of the shackles of nationalist
histories of art for some time. Travel, ex-
change, and networks have become regular
subjects of conferences, dissertations, and
books. Chronological divisions, however—
the other organizing principle underlying the
makeup of courses and faculties—remain for
the most part stubbornly in place. The An-
nales school embrace of the *longue durée* not-
withstanding, historians of art and architec-
ture willing to take on centuries at a time
remain a rarity, at least outside the scope of
survey teaching or textbook writing.

Marvin Trachtenberg is among the few
historians able to write with equal authority
and confidence about the medieval and Re-
naissance periods. In *Building-in-Time: From
Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion*, he re-
casts the relation between them according
to categories he devises, centered on the
conception of time and its relation to the
practice and theory of building. The book,
divided into nine chapters and an after-
word, has as its protagonists Leon Battista
Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, and the
churches of Tuscany.

Taking inspiration from an essay by How-
ard Burns about Michelangelo's "building
against time"—strategies for ensuring that
the integrity of his design for St. Peter's
would be preserved even after his death—
Trachtenberg defines two other terms:
Building-in-Time and Building-outside-
Time.[1] The first describes centuries of prac-
tice by which large cathedrals, urban
squares, and other monumental buildings
were erected over time spans exceeding the
life span of any single participant. The sec-
ond, more familiar idea is ascribed to Al-
berti: that the perfection and coherence of
an architectural design can only be dimin-
ished by alteration. Michelangelo shared
with Alberti a conviction that the ideal state
of his design was vulnerable to corruption
by the contingencies of the world and the
poor judgment of men. But while Burns's
account of "building against time" primarily
concerns Michelangelo's active efforts to
prevent this corruption, "seeking to use the
resources which he could obtain, and the
few months or years of life which remained

to him, with the maximum economy so as
to leave no opportunity for posterity to alter
his project," Trachtenberg is more inter-
ested in Alberti's conceptual formulation of
this idea of perfection, less in how he was
able to achieve it in practice.[2]

Before beginning his review of these sys-
tems in detail, Trachtenberg devotes a chap-
ter to the historical and cultural factors that
contributed to the premodern idea of time,
"Regimes of Time Consciousness in Archi-
tectural Lifeworlds." He quotes an extraordi-
nary passage by Petrarch (p. 60): "We are
always dying. I while I write, you while you
read, and others while they listen or stop
their ears, they are all dying"—evoking here
a modern sense of the pressure of time's
passing, and in other texts suggesting that
only through fame can time be defeated.[3]
These ideas, and the importance they place
on authorship, form the intellectual back-
ground to Alberti's construction of the ar-
chitect's role.

In ascribing the idea of "Building-outside-
Time" to Alberti, Trachtenberg gives much
emphasis to a passage he sees as the crux of
his aesthetic theory. It states that a build-
ing's beauty corresponds to the degree to
which it has attained "that reasoned har-
mony of all the parts within a body, so that
nothing may be added, taken away, or al-
tered, but for the worse."[4] This is indeed an
important passage, and it speaks to Trach-
tenberg's primary interest in Alberti's con-
ception of the integrity of a design. Yet Al-
berti was also concerned with how designs
came into being, and on this subject he
demonstrated a more flexible, inclusive ap-
proach. For example, he offers advice about
research into existing models, how to find
them and what to do with them:

> I would have him [the architect] take
> the same approach as one might toward
> the study of letters, where no one would
> be satisfied until he had read and exam-
> ined every author, good and bad, who
> had written anything on the subject in
> which he was interested. Likewise, wher-
> ever there is a work that has received
> general approval, he should inspect it
> with great care, record it in drawing,
> note its numbers, and construct models
> and examples of it . . . and should he
> find anything anywhere of which he ap-
> proves, he should adopt and copy it; yet
> anything that he considers can be greatly
> refined, he should use his artistry and
> imagination to correct and put right.[5]

Trachtenberg cites the very first section of
this passage to reinforce the analogy Alberti
establishes between the literary author and
the architect. However, Alberti also articu-
lates here an aspect of the design process
that involves the deep study of past models
and their improvement through creative
transformation. What interests Trachtenberg
is not how Alberti or any other architect gets
to an idea but what he does with it—it is in
the execution that the problem of perfection
comes into play. The attitude toward models
was, however, a crucial part of aesthetic theory
and literary practice for everyone from Quin-
tilian to Petrarch, and the approach Alberti
articulates here is less rigid than the one
Trachtenberg attributes to him generally.

While ten years ago it might have been
possible to argue that Alberti's fame as a
writer stood in the shadow of Andrea Palla-
dio, the number of exhibitions, confer-
ences, and even monographs about him in
the last several years would make this a diffi-
cult claim to sustain.[6] Against this back-
ground, it is especially impressive that
Trachtenberg is able to present a new way
of thinking about Alberti's achievements,
through his insistence on the "true radical-
ism" of Alberti's ideas (p. 70). The extent to
which ideas have been naturalized can ob-
scure their radicalism, and Trachtenberg
would certainly argue that this is the case
with Alberti: he devotes an entire chapter to
"crypto-Albertianism," seeking out its latter-
day, unconscious proponents.

Despite the persuasive arguments Trach-
tenberg sets forth, some of his assertions are
open to debate. For example, "Alberti's
atemporal conception of architecture was
deeply dependent on, entangled with, fi-
nally dominated at its core by ideas and fac-
tors concerning the nature of written texts
(regardless of subject) and their authorship
as these subjects were construed at the
time" (p. 86). Although it is beyond dispute
that Alberti was an active writer and human-
ist throughout his career, he was also an
extremely original, engaged, and successful
architect. To say that he saw architecture
through texts risks misconstruing the cen-
trality of building per se to his endeavors.
The long sections of the treatise concerned
with the mundane aspects of construction
are not founded exclusively on his study of
ancient authors but on actual, on-site knowl-
edge of how buildings are assembled.

Trachtenberg in fact discusses Alberti's
buildings briefly in chapter 8, "Alberti and
Brunelleschi," writing, "The question is how

one accounts for Alberti's divergence of avowed principle from discernible habits of actual architectural practice" (p. 381). His answer is that the "formidable regime" of Building-in-Time was too strong for even Alberti to resist. True or not, this answer allows Trachtenberg to sidestep some of the more intricate issues involving the relation between his theory and practice, perpetuating a long-standing gap in the scholarship between discussion of Alberti as a theorist and as a builder. In an exciting new monograph, Massimo Bulgarelli discusses moments of convergence and distance between Alberti's ideas about ornament and their manifestation in the facade of S. Maria Novella in Florence or S. Andrea in Mantua. He also considers in depth a matter Trachtenberg touches on, that is, the pictorialism of Alberti's facades and the way they take into account the viewing subject—in other words, how his thinking about painting and perspective also informs his architectural designs.[7]

Trachtenberg gives little attention to the role of drawings or models in all of this, observing that they had no value in Alberti's time and that the practice of preserving drawings developed later (pp. 92–93). Yet drawings could be an important part of Trachtenberg's story, in that they could act as a contract or a record, fixing in memory a utopian design that could not or would not be realized. For Palladio in the *Quattro libri*, the woodcuts often served as a way of recovering the original, ideal project that had been lost to the contingencies of construction and the wiles of patronage: they gave him a way of recording in print what he had been unable to achieve in built form. Even for the contemporary architects Trachtenberg alludes to, the representation of a design through their own highly controlled representations (whether drawings, renderings, or photographs) is a crucial part of their assertion of authorship and their claim to Albertian perfection—inevitably compromised once a structure is occupied and begins to weather. Although a consideration of drawings and other representations might have amplified Trachtenberg's argument, his exclusion of them is a consequence of ending his story with Alberti. Such an end point is fair enough, considering how many of the previous centuries he considers. But it illustrates how at least some aspects of the traditional, chronological construction of the Renaissance can bring out important themes (such as, in this case, the growing significance of paper, both drawn and printed, to architectural culture).

Trachtenberg's insights into Alberti, his assertion of his radicalism and his perception of his impact are all extremely valuable. More original still, in some regards, is his articulation of Building-in-Time. The concept hinges on a set of descriptive terms, summarized as follows:

Contrary to the absolutist, closed and brittle, quixotic Albertian program of immutable design in which change, growth and adaptation were categorically proscribed, in the art of Building-in-Time, *continuous redesign* was accepted and valorized as a fundamental condition of architecture. *Concatenation* meant the possibility of structured change and growth, the re/alignment of the ever-malleable and openended spatio-structural program of a building with the duration of its production and existence. *Myopic progression* provided a gradualist, efficient, and responsive resolution of the various levels of design problems. The doctrine of *retrosynthesis* allowed what Alberti would insist was impossible (and conceptually sinful), the combination of evolution and change with unity, harmony, and the necessary degree of "perfection" of the never final product. (p. 145)

Armed with these concepts, Trachtenberg provides a lively chronicle of the volatile process of constructing the cathedral of Florence, the baptistery, campanile, and finally the dome. While the archives of the Opera dell'Duomo are burgeoning with documents (now accessible through the digital archive project of Margaret Haines, *The Years of the Cupola*), this massive project has until now lacked a synthetic description.[8] The intricacy of the story, the many players involved, and the span of centuries discourage a unified account and have led other authors to a number of simplifications and oversights. Among the most surprising consequences of a close reading is the conclusion that "the structural solution of the cupola of 1417–20 was not Brunelleschi's alone" (p. 157). The story of the cupola, and all of the heroism that it entails, is a common starting place for the narrative of Renaissance architecture. So Trachtenberg's revisionist characterization of it as belonging more to the logic of the preceding centuries than those to come has many consequences for how the whole story of the Renaissance can be told. In a later chapter, he demonstrates that our notion of Brunelleschi as the sole architect of the cupola depends on Antonio Manetti's retrospective biography of 1482–88, which was heavily inflected by an Albertian view of authorship. Manetti used his biography, composed decades after Brunelleschi's death, to paint a triumphant picture of the architect, minimizing the role of collaborators and blaming others for any defects in the design or its execution.

In his analysis of the campanile, traditionally assigned to Giotto as the single author, Trachtenberg demonstrates the important role played by Andrea Pisano in his "retrosynthesis." He concludes,

What Andrea accomplished, I suggest, was possible only because his imagina-

tion was not (yet) blocked by the rigid ideas that Alberti was to advocate and which served to warp and frustrate the architectural process forever afterward, particularly in the architectural age of Modernism. Andrea worked in a pre-Albertian architectural regime which deeply believed that both design perfection and design alteration were not only necessary but also fully compatible. (p. 186)

As this last quotation reveals, Trachtenberg walks a fine line in his view of Alberti—a fascinating one for the reader—between heroizing and demonizing him. Essentially, Trachtenberg seems to warm to whatever subject he is immediately discussing, so that Alberti sounds rich and deep in the chapters about him, rigid and narrow in the others.

Among the virtues of Trachtenberg's analysis is his attention not only to the abstract qualities of a building's plan, section, and elevation—too often the mode through which architecture is considered—but also to the way it is perceived. In his words, these were structures that were "extremely rich, sometimes overwhelming in their constituted mass, volume, and detail of every kind—buildings that intensely stressed materiality and visual effect (although often historians seem only to see abstraction)" (p. 165). This emphasis comes into play particularly in his discussion of the Palazzo Vecchio, which builds on his monograph in its description of the multiple perspectives and angles of view that helped shape the building's design.[9] Here and elsewhere, Trachtenberg enriches his narrative through well-conceived and meticulously executed illustrations, many of them digitally manipulated with the assistance of Michael Waters.

In the first chapter and in the afterword, Trachtenberg reveals himself to be a historian happy to engage with the present. This is of immense value, particularly in an era in which architectural theory is often written from a very narrow chronological lens and when the entire profession seems held in the grips of "presentism." Chapter 1, "In Modern Oblivion: Rethinking Architecture, Time, and History," frames historical considerations in relation to the systematic suppression of time and history in modern architecture. In the afterword, Trachtenberg identifies the "crypto-Albertianism" of contemporary architectural culture: in essence, architects' assumption that their buildings should be immune to change. The Albertian fixation Trachtenberg identifies in contemporary architectural practice amounts to little less than a crisis. Too many buildings built for specific purposes fall into quick disuse when fortunes change. Of course, other factors are at play: for instance, the functionalism ascribed to Louis Sullivan, which has had a huge impact on the teaching of architecture. If buildings are crafted to suit every aspect of a client's need, it is little wonder that their utility should die

with the client. Hence, the field of historic preservation and contemporary practice known as "adaptive reuse." The most stunning recent example is the Tate Modern, transformed by Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron from a former power station into an art gallery with far more generous spaces than any purpose-built, value-engineered building could ever have. As Trachtenberg would be quick to point out, almost all of premodern architecture could be described by this category. Many highly inventive buildings arose from these constraints—not least, Michelangelo's Laurentian Library.

The problem Trachtenberg identifies in contemporary architectural culture might also be ascribed to the disjunction between how architects are trained—as author-architects—and the realities of practice, which rarely confer these privileges. The majority of architects work in circumstances far more akin to their medieval forebears than to those of luminaries in the field such as Frank Gehry and Richard Meier that Trachtenberg cites, at least in the sense that they must respond as imaginatively as they can to the contingencies of preexisting structures. But with his comments on current practice, Trachtenberg demonstrates that he has devised tools that could be wielded to productive effect in contemporary criticism. His book deserves an audience among architects, and it may be hoped that it can launch a discussion in that realm.

Cutting history the way Trachtenberg does in itself yields interesting results. Even his mentor Richard Krautheimer studiously avoided the Renaissance, writing about the medieval and Baroque periods. Trachtenberg's ease in moving back and forth between periods is a remarkable gift because of the way it forces us to reconsider those well-worn boundaries. When he insists on a break, it seems worth taking heed.

The reader naturally wants the narrative to continue beyond Alberti. What Trachtenberg has done, however, is provide a powerful lens that other scholars may take up in working their way into the sixteenth century and beyond, and in exploring further why exactly it was that modern architecture became so fixated on functionalism and authorial control.

This is a dense, rich book, passionately argued, full of new ideas and interpretations, and rewarding close reading. The few points of discussion raised here testify to its power to provoke. It should fuel such discussions for many years to come.

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Notes

1. Howard Burns, "Building against Time: Renaissance Strategies to Secure Large Churches against Changes to Their Design," in *L'église dans l'architecture de la Renaissance: Actes du colloque tenu à Tours du 28 au 31 mai 1990*, ed. Jean Guillaume (Paris: Picard, 1995), 107–31.

2. Ibid., 109.

3. Trachtenberg cites Morris Bishop, "Petrarch," in *Renaissance Profiles*, ed. J. H. Plumb (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 16–17. The letter is translated in Bishop, *Letters from Petrarch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 203; the Latin text is "Familiarium rerum libri," bk. 24/1, in Petrarch, *Epistole di Francesco Petrarca*, ed. Ugo Dotti (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1978), 520–38.

4. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neal Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 156 (bk. 6, chap. 2), quoted by Trachtenberg, p. 71.

5. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 315–16 (bk. 9, chap. 10). The first lines are quoted by Trachtenberg, p. 86.

6. Among the recent publications on Alberti principally concerned with architecture are Massimo Bulgarelli, *Leon Battista Alberti, 1404–1472: Architettura e storia* (Milan: Electa, 2008); Massimo Bulgarelli et al., eds., *Leon Battista Alberti e l'architettura* (Milan: Silvana, 2006); Arturo Calzona et al., eds., *Leon Battista Alberti: Architetture e committenti; Atti dei Convegni internazionali del comitato nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti*, 2 vols. (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 2004); Roberto Cardini and Mariangela Regoliosi, eds., *Alberti e la cultura del Quattrocento: Atti del convegno internazionale del Comitato nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti*, 2 vols. (Florence: Polistampa, 2007); Mario Carpo and Francesco Furlan, eds., *Leon Battista Alberti's Delineation of the City of Rome* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007); Anthony Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti, Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Francesco Paolo Fiore with Arnold Nesselrath, *La Roma di Leon Battista Alberti: Umanisti, architetti e artisti alla scoperta dell'antico nella citta' del Quattrocento* (Milan: Skira, 2005); Branko Mitrović, *Serene Greed of the Eye: Leon Battista Alberti and the Philosophical Foundations of Architectural Theory* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2005); and Caspar Pearson, *Humanism and the Urban World: Leon Battista Alberti and the Renaissance City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

7. Bulgarelli, *Leon Battista Alberti, 1404–1472.* Another excellent discussion of Alberti's activities occurs in Howard Burns's synthesis of Alberti's approach to writing, design, and the study of the antique; Burns, "Leon Battista Alberti," in *Storia dell'architettura italiana: Il Quattrocento*, ed. Francesco Paolo Fiore (Milan: Electa, 1998), 114–65.

8. Margaret Haines, *The Years of the Cupola*, http://duomo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/.

9. Marvin Trachtenberg, *Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

LAURA R. BASS

Two important and richly illustrated books—Joanna Woodall's on the Netherlandish portraitist of Philip II of Spain, Anthonis Mor, and Laura R. Bass's on portraiture and theater in seventeenth-century Spain—appeared in the wake of renewed studies on Spanish Hapsburg portraiture. These were inspired in recent decades by the various exhibitions and conferences commemorating Philip II and his father, Charles V, on the occasion of the quadricentennial and quincentenary of their respective death (1998) and birth (2000), and then progressively extended to the other members of the family. Both books shed new light on the topic, reconsidering the well-known dynastic family's paintings in the wider context of the conception, function, and practice of portraiture, understood from an interdisciplinary perspective and in dialogue with recent theoretical approaches to early modern portraiture.[1]

Woodall's book is primarily the result of a long-standing friendship with Anthonis Mor that goes back to her pioneering doctoral thesis on Mor's portraits (1989). The book, however, is far more ambitious than a simple revision of the dissertation, as it considers Mor's entire career and production—not only the portraits but also the religious paintings—and, through a rich series of case studies, proposes to question portraiture more widely as a paradigm of painting on the basis of a "semiotics of friendship." Woodall relies here on the famous comparison between portraiture and friendship used by Leon Battista Alberti to define the mimetic power of painting: "Painting contains a divine force which not only makes the absent present, as friendship is said to, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive."[2] She points out how the classical references engaged with here, mainly Cicero's *De amicitia* and, more broadly, Plato and Aristotle, define friendship in terms of likeness and equivalence, but also of overcoming difference through love and emulation: the friend is an exemplar, an alter ego, but also a perfected image of the self. In a framework that considers the subject not as autonomous but as a "relational self" and the portrait as a dialogue between two terms, the semiotics of friendship places the interpretation of portraiture within a complex nexus of relationships between sitter and representation, sitter and portraitist, portrait and beholder, and painter and work. The principal question that emerges is thus how the mirrorlike painting may reveal, through the connections and disjunctions between contingent embodiment and