Kenneth Frampton

Labour, Work and Architecture: Collected Essays on Architecture and Design


Over the past four decades, Kenneth Frampton has been one of the most influential architectural theorists, historians, and critics. His prodigious output of books, articles, and reviews treats a wide range of geographies and building types even while his scholarship has focused unambiguously on the question of modernity and the avant-garde in the last century. Many of his most important texts, as well as a few never before published, have been selected for Labour, Work and Architecture, giving us the opportunity to assess the complexity and development of his thought from the 1960s to the present. Collectively, they are a tour de force displaying Frampton’s subtle combination of intellectual history and architectural analysis, with which he argues for an uncompromising critical interpretation of the symbolic and utilitarian potential of built form.

From the beginning, Frampton’s project has been overtly humanist, grounded in an explanation of architecture’s potential to expand or compromise our political and social experience of the world. That agenda is signaled in the present volume through its dedication to the memory of Hannah Arendt and the importance Frampton places on her book The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958). His essay on Arendt’s philosophy, “The Status of Man and the Status of His Objects” (1979), takes pride of place as the first in the collection. Taking Arendt’s characterization of labor as essentially natural and related to biological processes, and work as fundamentally artificial in that it produces the world of things and the borders in which individual life occurs, Frampton explores these ideas as categories that are easily recognizable in the dual meaning of the term “architecture.” On the one hand, architecture is the field of building as a process, continuous and unending like life itself. On the other, it is an art of constructing specific buildings that are useful to human agents. Frampton argues that the modern world has seen the shift in the balance between work and labor tipped toward a society that builds and lives profoundly in the shadow of alienation. In the modern world of consumption and faith in technology, the sphere of objects dominates to the point that individuals are subject to the ever-changing and impermanent world of the commodity, architectural and otherwise. Such a social condition replaces individual political action with anonymous bureaucracy, polis with privatization, culture with the production of kitsch or the celebration of technology for its own sake. While akin here to Karl Marx in his early writings on work and labor, Frampton and Arendt part company from him in their rejection of his allegiance to industrialization and to the machine as a potentially progressive and liberating force. Instead, they regard the individual, or rather the agent working with other agents, as holding the potential to regain the polis and restore the balance between work and labor. This formulation allows for consideration of “the dependency of political power on its social and physical constitution, that is to say, on its derivation from the living proximity of men and from the physical manifestation of their public being in built form. For architecture at...
least, the relevance of *The Human Condition* resides in this—in its formation of that political reciprocity that must of necessity obtain, for good or ill, between the status of men and the status of their objects" (42). Frampton derives much of his power and consistency as a critic and historian from the way he has pointed out, throughout his career, architects and buildings that fail in this goal or, conversely, indicate how humans can construct (in all senses of the word) a viable and lively public sphere.

Frampton develops the tension between the individual and the built environment through his emphases on intellectual history and architectural analysis. In the present volume, this tendency can be traced through three distinct groupings of the articles under the rubrics of theory, history, and criticism. The theoretical work includes such important and well-known essays as “Towards a Critical Regionalism” (1983) as well as the single text—“The Volvo Case” (1976)—that seriously tackles the term “labor” in the compendium’s title. For the history section, Frampton has chosen pieces that stress his interest in and affinity with the modernist avant-garde. The criticism section focuses on celebrated architects such as Tadao Ando, José Rafael Moneo, and Hans Scharoun, but also includes focused interpretations of less-studied architects such as Álvaro Siza and Peter Zumthor. This section best manifests Frampton’s critical edge as well as his wit, especially the devastating review of Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo’s Ford Foundation Headquarters titled “A House of Ivy League Values” (1968). As a whole, the essays hang together because of Frampton’s commitment to analyzing built form in terms of its functional and symbolic relation to the human.

In his introduction to the criticism portion of the book, Frampton notes that his notion of the functional and symbolic qualities of architecture developed from the criteria for critical analysis articulated by Christian Norberg-Schulz. From that starting point, Frampton argues that the critic must deal with “the opposition between the physical milieu and the social milieu in the appraisal of a building, with the former stressing functional considerations and the latter focusing on the symbolic” (256). He is not claiming that the functional and symbolic are statically transparent to specific forms. Rather, he looks for and judges buildings according to how the form and the experience of it relate to functional and symbolic requirements. That is to say, for Frampton, function and symbol are ontologically part of built structures even though specific buildings variously succeed or fail based on how well their program and construction embody use and need. Particularly in the essays of criticism, one sees Frampton gradually arrive at a means of exploring the coalescence of function and symbolism in his theoretical exploration of the tectonic. He first laid out this position in “Rappel à l’Ordre: The Case for the Tectonic” (1990), which is included in this publication.

Frampton’s interpretation of buildings as expressions and experiences of human potential links his historical and critical work to his earlier analysis of Arendt. But this intellectual theme is coupled with another equally compelling emphasis: close and careful attention to architectural form. Reading Frampton’s work over several decades reminds us of what such attention can reveal not only about architecture but also about its analysis and use in contemporary society. For example, in one of the most recent essays, “The Legacy of Alvar Aalto” (1998), his detailed description of the plan and elevation of the Hansaviertel apartment building in Berlin (1955-57) buttresses his claim for the progressive potential of Aalto’s work, “a ceaseless interplay between natural constraint and cultural ingenuity” (253). For Frampton, intellectual history is all well and good, but for architectural historians and critics it must begin and end in the built environment itself.

These paired concerns with intellectual history and architectural analysis also define Frampton’s historical place within the developing discipline of architectural history. His unwavering interest in the avant-garde and its critical potential or failure locate his scholarship within the range of questions that dominated the 1960s and 1970s, a time when he was in dialogue with such powerhouses of the field as Manfredo Tafuri. But, as was the case with Tafuri, other concerns of architectural history that have arisen since then are relatively absent or unengaged in his writing. For instance, the rise of social history as an important field of architectural study is not acknowledged in this volume. Institutional analysis, political economy, and social relations of gender are topics and fields of research outside his concern with individual architects and architectural hermeneutics. The importance of Frampton’s work is not in question, but his methods are now but one segment of a broader field.

Frampton’s project has much to say to a wide variety of scholars and practitioners who care deeply about the critical potential of architecture. He is trying to get to something fundamental about the individual’s relation to the social through his analysis of architecture. Arendt pointed in this direction in what is perhaps her most famous book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York, 1964), which begins with an analysis of the spatial significance of the courtroom in which Adolf Eichmann was tried. In this unique example of Arendt’s interest in the functional and symbolic import of architectural form, one discerns premonitions of Frampton’s scholarship. His attempt to tackle the most necessary aspects of society and the built environment is a refreshing riposte to the analytical cynicism of much contemporary scholarship. Frampton, like Arendt, believes in the human potential, and this is abundantly displayed in a satisfying collection of essays.

PAUL B. JASKOT
DePaul University

Notes
1. See, for example, the classic text by Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Oslo, 1966).