Architectures 1–5
Frédéric Compain, Richard Copans, Stan Neumann, and Catherine Adda, directors

Architectures 1
Dessau Bauhaus, Dessau; Walter Gropius; Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto, Álvaro Siza; Familiistère, Guise; Jean-Baptiste André Godin; Nemausus Housing, Nimes; Jean Nouvel; Georges Pompidou Center, Paris; Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers

Architectures 2
Johnson Wax Building, Racine, Wisconsin; Frank Lloyd Wright; Galleria Umberto I, Naples; Emanuele Rocco; Lyon-Satolas TGV Station, Lyon; Santiago Calatrava; Thermal Baths, Vals Graubünden, Peter Zumthor; Paris Fine Arts School, Félix Duban

Architectures 3
Jewish Museum, Berlin; Daniel Libeskind; Garnier Opera, Paris; Charles Garnier; Convent of La Tourette, Eveux-sur-Arbesle, France; Le Corbusier; Casa Milà, Barcelona; Antoni Gaudi Auditorium Building, Chicago; Louis Sullivan; Municipal Center, Säynätsalo, Alvar Aalto

Architectures 4
Royal Saltworks, Senans; Claude Nicholas Ledoux; La Maison de Verre, Paris; Pierre Chareau; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao; Frank Gehry; Jean Prouvé’s House, Jean Prouvé; Multimedia Library, Sendai; Toyota Ito; St. Foy Abbey, Conques, France

Architectures 5
Alhambra, Grenada, Spain; House of Sugimoto, Kyoto; Reception and Congress Building, Rome; Adalberto Libera; Yoyogi Olympic Gymnasium, Kenzo Tange; Villa Barbaro, Masera, Italy; Andrea Palladio; Phaeno Science Center, Wolfsburg, Germany; Zaha Hadid


The 5-DVD Architectures series was conceived by Richard Copans and Stan Neumann, with individual films directed by the two of them as well as by Frédéric Compain, Catherine Adda, and Julien Donada. Each DVD contains four to six illustrated lectures, each twenty-five minutes long, that cover a range of buildings from St. Foy Abbey to the Phaeno Science Center by Zaha Hadid. Produced for the European cable channel devoted to cultural programming, ARTE, all are well thought out and exquisitely presented. Most address the basics of a building’s history and context with a view to the design particulars. Subthemes of the lectures vary, some emphasizing materials, others formal composition, and yet others the relationship between client and architect. Since each lecture is a self-contained short film, some of the descriptions and analyses are quite basic, and comparative analysis is rare. Furthermore, despite the fact that most of the buildings treated are modern or contemporary, it is difficult to obtain a sense of the broader history of modernism from the series. This is compensated for by the rich and imaginative visual presentation designed to give a strong impression of each building as an object in time and space. The moving shots are slow and unhurried, taking the time to view a landscape, catch a shadow of a bird moving across a surface of a building, a reflection on a window, a detail of a column. Sometimes, the moving shots are devoid of people to emphasize the architecture, but in almost all of the lectures there are shots that show people interacting with the building, whether they are tourists, cleaning ladies, pedestrians, bathers, workmen, or running children, in each case creating a sense of the building’s contemporary lived-in state. Moving shots are interspersed with a variety of still photos from archives, family photo albums, construction photos, historic views, and even an occasional “slide show.” Most of the lectures make use of real or computer-aided volumetric models that are quite informative when discussing program, massing, or siting. In fact, the volumetric models—showing, for example, the programmatic elements of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the design elements of Jean Prouvé’s House—are the most dynamic part of the exposition.

One never sees the speaker who presents the lectures in a slow and calm voice—a woman for the English-language narration and a man for French and German language versions, which can be selected on the DVD. This together with the measured and carefully choreographed pace of the camera work creates an aesthetic that at times functions in a positive way to allow one to enjoy the visual aspects of the building, but at other times is too clichéd. One of the weakest lectures—though certainly as visually appealing as the others—is the discussion of Peter Zumthor’s Thermal Baths at Vals Graubünden, Switzerland, where the long shots and underwater views seem to fill time rather than define the intangible essence of quietude as they are intended. Far superior is the more complex story and choreography of the Garnier Opera House or Otto Wagner’s Vienna Savings Bank, a rather dynamic lecture. The same is true for the discussion of the Bauhaus, which presents a thorough blend of spatial analysis, close views of the building, and a brief overview of its history. Clearly, the producers of the series understand how moving images can explain architecture and have tried to stay close to the strengths of the film medium.

In most cases, the lectures shy away from big value claims, which is a vast improvement over films made a genera-
tion earlier. Nonetheless, despite the intensity that the moving images can bring to the object, the figure of the architect comes across in the films as rather stiff and hagiographic. Le Corbusier, Frank Gehry, Antoni Gaudi, and Alvaro Siza are all presented as having worked in a calm, diligent, and professional manner, always making profound and well-thought-out decisions separated from the chaotic realities of their lives and times. At the architecture school that Siza designed, we hear that “the purposefully controlled irregularities allow [Siza] to break the monotonity of his basic unit.” Usually, the story line is directed more to the historical facts. Discussions about design process are rare; the architecture seems to come right from the architect’s mind. All in all, however, the lectures are well crafted and worthy of being used in a classroom situation, but educators need to review each one to see in what way they might fit into the broader pedagogical ambitions of a class.

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