Marvin Trachtenberg  
*Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion*  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 516 pp., 120 color and 200 b/w illus. $65, ISBN 9780300165920

Time is not the first theme one awaits in a treatise on architecture. And yet, it provides a convincing framework for Marvin Trachtenberg to redirect our perception of the building culture of eleventh- through sixteenth-century Italy from a series of more or less iconic styles, monuments, and architects to sources for highlighting and even recovering a process of making buildings that adapted to the flux of time. The strangeness to contemporary readers of connecting time to building has led Trachtenberg to cover cultural and theoretical aspects of time ostensibly far from the art of building. The depth to which Trachtenberg grounds attitudes toward time before reinserting them into building penetrates beyond the foundations of architecture, to touch essential aspects of how we conceive of architects, authors, and implicitly, ourselves in relation to history, mortality, and whatever attempts we may make to guarantee ourselves our own iconic status in the eyes of later commentators.

Trachtenberg prefaces the book with his concept of building-in-time and its obverse, building-outside-time, which provide a binary framework coordinating the entire text. In chapters one through four he presents his theoretical and cultural-historical analysis of time on its own, and then in relation to building. He continues with a series of in-depth, formal-theoretical case studies of buildings, which occupy chapters five through nine.

The number of pages Trachtenberg devotes to the theory and cultural context of time is consistent with his binary framework. While building-in-time was standard practice in one way or another up to the sixteenth century, since then a shift to building-outside-time has so dominated design, theory, critique, and history, Trachtenberg argues, as to eradicate our memory of building-in-time. How we build, evaluate, even describe architecture today blinds us to earlier processes. This is the “oblivion” of the subtitle. In order to recover the historical processes of building in relation to time, Trachtenberg methodically establishes that conceptions of time are historically determined. This section is dense and challenging reading compared to the formal analyses later in the book. Nonetheless, the author deserves enormous credit for mapping the territory, drawing into architectural discourse findings from fields including cultural history, the history of science, literary theory, ancient philosophy, theology, religious history, and cultural geography.

According to Trachtenberg—and what follows can only be a gross oversimplification—from antiquity up to the beginning of the fourteenth century, perception of time was what some call ecological, linked to the cycles of daylight, the moon, and the seasons. Ancient Romans and medieval Benedictines alike divided night and day each into twelve equal units, with the result that their hours only matched on the equinoxes. Time was subordinate to nature, and provided increments that, though broad, were sufficient to link labor to the rhythms defining and conditioning particularly agricultural production. The shift in both the idea and measurement of time came with urban industry, trade, and banking, whose practitioners came to demand consistent and regulated timekeeping articulated in fine increments. The mechanisms instituting these ideas were new clocks added to civic and church bell towers and hourglasses visualizing the passing of time inside workplaces and studies.

Trachtenberg continues that as urban time shifted from cyclical to durational time, emphasis turned from when to work to how much value workers can produce within a given time span. The only natural cycle that could not be converted to this new, durational time was that of mortal life, whose terminus is utterly unpredictable. Some reference to the Black Death here would only strengthen Trachtenberg’s argument. He focuses rather on humanists, whom he describes as some of the first to become sensitized to a tension between mortality and productivity. While time was an essential tool for their philosophical work, winnowing canonical from mediocre works and thinkers, it thwarted humanists’ attempts to insert themselves into the canon of works and writers to be remembered. An anxiety of productivity emerged, articulated by Petrarch, with each thinker working feverishly to generate a corpus worthy of the ages before his time ran arbitrarily out. Their fear was not death in itself, but the oblivion that premature death might bring. Trachtenberg continues that our concept of an author and the mechanisms for protecting the inviolability of his or her work and thereby the memory emerged or re-emerged from antiquity, from this fetishization of fame. The formal, internally perfect composition of a literary work was essential, and it needed to be kept safe from bad or arrogant copyists or second-rate imitators. Through an uncorrupted body of works the humanist could develop an authorial persona of such status, or *auctoritas*, that his or her works would become unassailable over time.

Leon Battista Alberti was “the Petrarch of architectural theory, both in his thinking and in his position as the founder of this discourse” (61). Trachtenberg sustains that Alberti transferred the concept of authorship to the medium of architecture, affording architects a parallel framework for producing autonomous works, authorial status, and protections against the architectural equivalent of bad or arrogant copyists—successive architects. He achieved this by projecting directly techniques of literary composition onto architecture. This meant isolating the design phase from the construction phase: the architect was to resolve all problems before construction, essentially publishing his design as a complete whole, so thoroughly worked out in its entirety and individual parts that nothing could be added or taken away. Time worked on the architect’s side in generating such a design: the more time for iterations, models, advice from experts and others that he could incorporate into his compositional process, the more he could produce the definitive solution to the design brief. After that, the integrity of the design and the *auctoritas* of the architect established through other works were intended to protect the project from bastardizations by later interlopers over the threatening incursion of time.
Trachtenberg notes that the downside of Alberti’s invention of the architect as author is both its theft of design from the building process and its identity of a building with its originary design. Alberti’s ideas, less than his buildings, establish the concept of building-outside-time. Trachtenberg’s elaborate development of Alberti’s role and the context in which he lived give greater force to his definition of how Alberti induced us to forget building-in-time. In this alternative means of practice, attributed by Trachtenberg to Giotto, Talenti, Brunelleschi, and numerous other builders and projects across late medieval and Renaissance Italy, architects provided the least, rather than the most information necessary at any moment in the design process, leaving details and even at times significant upcoming challenges, such as the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore or the cupola piers in the Siena Duomo Nuovo project, to be resolved—or unresolved—on the worksite. Again, the strength of this more adaptive building process was also its weakness. While an Albertian, perfected design might express well the architect’s genius and even the patron’s representational and practical needs, it was incapable of responding to changes in patrons, users, or other social-cultural factors over the lifetime of the building. A project generated using Trachtenberg’s building-in-time framework was extremely responsive to such factors, and could even be derailed by over-ambitious architects or patrons. In most cases, time and its provision for the intensely collaborative, consultational building process of Italy’s city states, and, to a lesser degree, of principalities and of the Vatican itself, helped resolve such failings, such as in the case of Santa Maria del Fiore or the Milan cathedral. Siena provided the extreme case pushing beyond the system’s limits, parallel to its citizens’ own difficulty in containing their political and cultural competition with Florence.

Trachtenberg’s formal evidence is as compelling as his overall argument. His analyses in chapters four through nine of primarily Italian projects realized between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries posited an alternative aesthetic to that generally valorized by observers from the Renaissance to the present. The aesthetic is one of adaptation overlaid by a provisional gestalt of the whole—something familiar to readers of Trachtenberg’s *Dominion of the Eye*. While Trachtenberg linked the formal success of projects such as the Palazzo Vecchio to the period, perspective eye of trecento Florence in his earlier book, here he provides an archaeology of the design method generating that success. At the end of chapter four, Trachtenberg uses his case studies to elaborate four aspects of building-in-time, which he defines as continuous redesign, myopic progression, concatenation, and retrosynthesis. Continuous redesign is the core concept (132–34). It emerges from Trachtenberg’s observation that long periods of construction afforded builders opportunities to adapt designs according to perceived needs, including changes in stylistic preferences. Myopic progression (134–39) defines how architects detailed a project or a portion of a project only as much as needed at a particular moment in construction, not in advance, even ignoring potentially intractable challenges until the building had progressed to the degree that such challenges had to be faced. Concatenation (139–41) refers to the linking of each successive “myopic progressive” moment to the preceding ones, integrating each stage in design to what was already built. Retrosynthesis (141–43) is a development of the process of concatenation at any moment of potential completion, coordinating previous phases to project the appearance of a coherent whole.

Trachtenberg’s *Building-in-Time* registers a growing unease by historians or theorists of art or architecture to the static aesthetic of the autonomous designed object, perfect in all its parts. Despite fertile references, especially at the outset, to a variety of critical-theoretical approaches, at no point does Trachtenberg fetishize theory, so problematizing individual works and their authors as to disperse meaning or accountability. As much as the book sometimes reads as a theoretical polemic, Trachtenberg’s unflinching historical instinct links each phase of a project to a specific cultural context and builder. The many rich examples he provides of building-in-time draw the reader to think of even more. The result opens, rather than closes, discussion, making this book a starting point for others to rethink other examples in Italian or world architecture.

It is a tribute to Trachtenberg’s historical approach that he leaves no period in the history of the buildings he studies unexamined. That includes the moment of us perceiving them, and our own agency as viewers, itself conditioned by our own building culture and concepts of time, authorship, career, and even mortality. The preface and afterword, together with numerous asides throughout the text, blur distinctions among art and architectural history, theory, criticism, and practice, offering a fruitful path to address the uneasy relationship among art history, architectural history, and practice noted by Alina Payne and others. *Building-in-Time* presents history as a source for rethinking contemporary design—less as a quarry for mining historical forms or styles, and more as a framework for investigating how to conceive architecture as production, not product. In displacing our focus from possessing to making, Trachtenberg draws our attention away from autonomous objects and their unique authorial creators, to the many fleeting lives of those building and transforming any work of architecture.

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**Notes**
1. One of the various modern voices that Trachtenberg analyzes in depth (240–44) is that of James Ackerman regarding Milan cathedral in “‘Ars Sine Scientia Nihil Est’: Gothic Theory of Architecture at the Cathedral of Milan,” *Art Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (June 1949), 84–111.