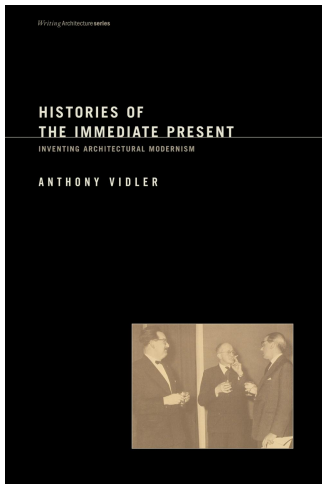


Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism / Anthony Vidler.— (Writing architecture series).—Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, May 2008.—264 p.: ill.—ISBN 978-0-262-72051-9 (pa., alk. paper): \$22.95.



What is contemporary architecture's relationship to history? How has postmodernism altered our understanding of modernist architecture? To what extent have architectural historians and their narratives influenced actual practice? These are the provocative questions Anthony Vidler poses in *Histories of the Immediate Present*.

Vidler, professor of the Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture at The Cooper Union, New York, is no stranger to the quandaries of postmodernism. In this study, he draws insightfully on ideas from his previous publications on contemporary architecture, including *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) and *Architecture between Spectacle and Use* (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven, distributed by Yale University Press, 2008). The present text serves as a belated prequel of sorts to those works, examining the emergence of architectural history as an academic enterprise increasingly entangled in the broader cultural politics of interpretation.

Vidler's argument focuses on the writings of four influential postwar architectural historians: Emil Kaufmann, Colin Rowe, Reyner Banham, and Manfredo Tafuri. Although he traces the intellectual development of each figure, his treatment should not be considered biographical. Instead, each of the book's four chapters provides an analysis of specific moments or writings in which the historicization of the discipline appeared at its most scrupulous and overtly ideological. Covering 1945 to 1975—years coinciding with the initial impact of postmodern theory upon architectural theory—Vidler presents a compelling account of the diverse and frequently competing historical narratives developed by each historian to legitimize, knowingly or not, the work and lineage of specific contemporary architects or architectural programs. For Kaufmann, the rationalist simplicity of Enlightenment design proved a source of continuity for current design. For Rowe, the work of Le Corbusier found roots in the Italian mannerism of Palladian villas. In the eyes of Banham, by contrast, only early twentieth-century futurism could explain recent architectural production. And for Tafuri, steeped in post-structuralist ideas, the tension between Renaissance science and humanist self-reflection sparked the perceived crisis of modern architecture.

*Histories* is aimed at the scholar. It should be noted that earlier versions of these essays have been published elsewhere; a new introduction and conclusion bracket the chapters. The text includes an index and footnotes, but no bibliography. The volume has just four black-and-white reproductions. Nevertheless, Vidler's lucid historiography is a significant addition to the small but growing body of scholarship devoted to the history of architectural history. It should appeal strongly to architectural historians, especially those studying the twentieth century, and it is recommended for graduate programs in architecture or architectural history.

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