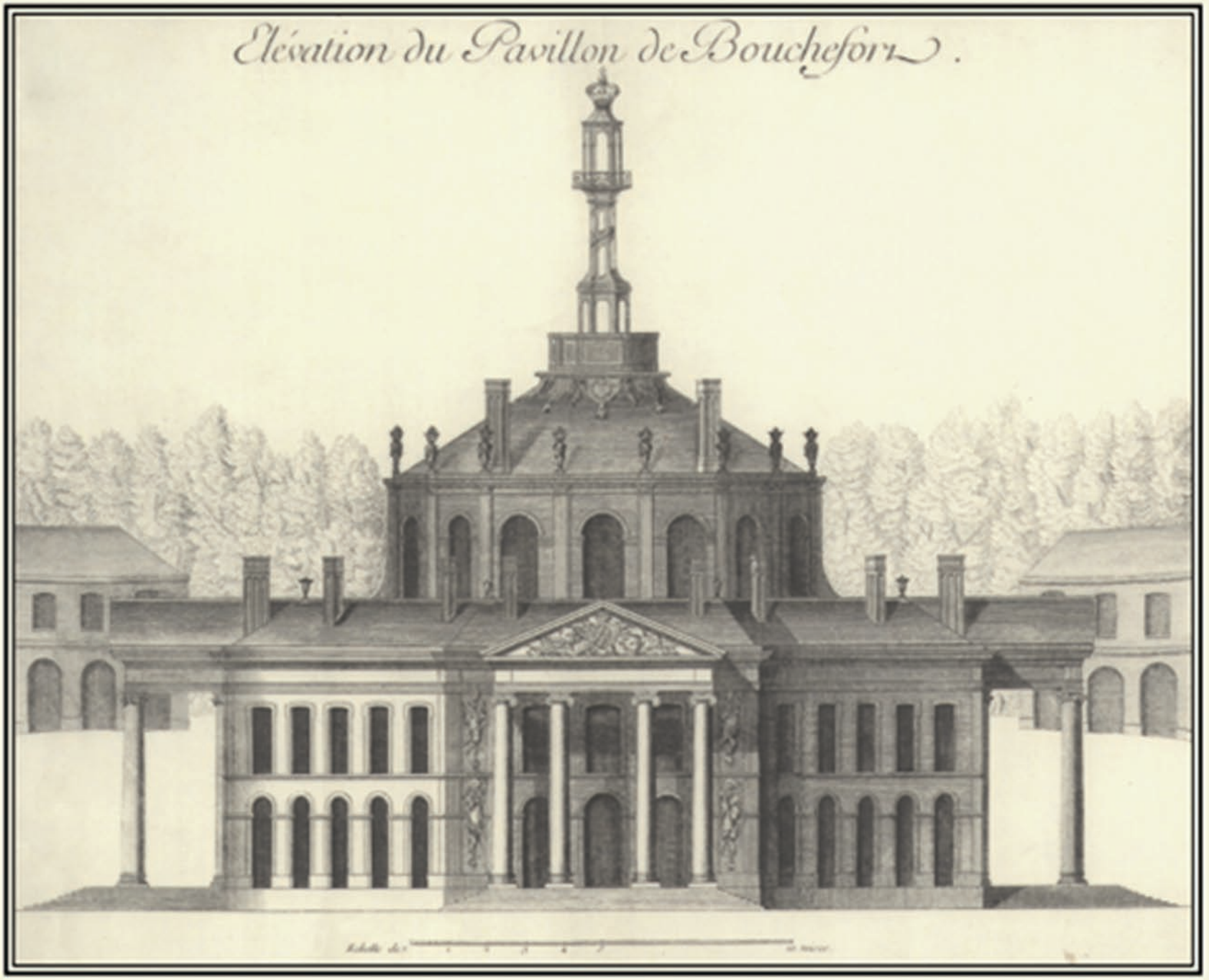
Germain Boffrand Book of Architecture

Edited and introduced by Caroline van Eck; translated by David Britt



GERMAIN BOFFRAND

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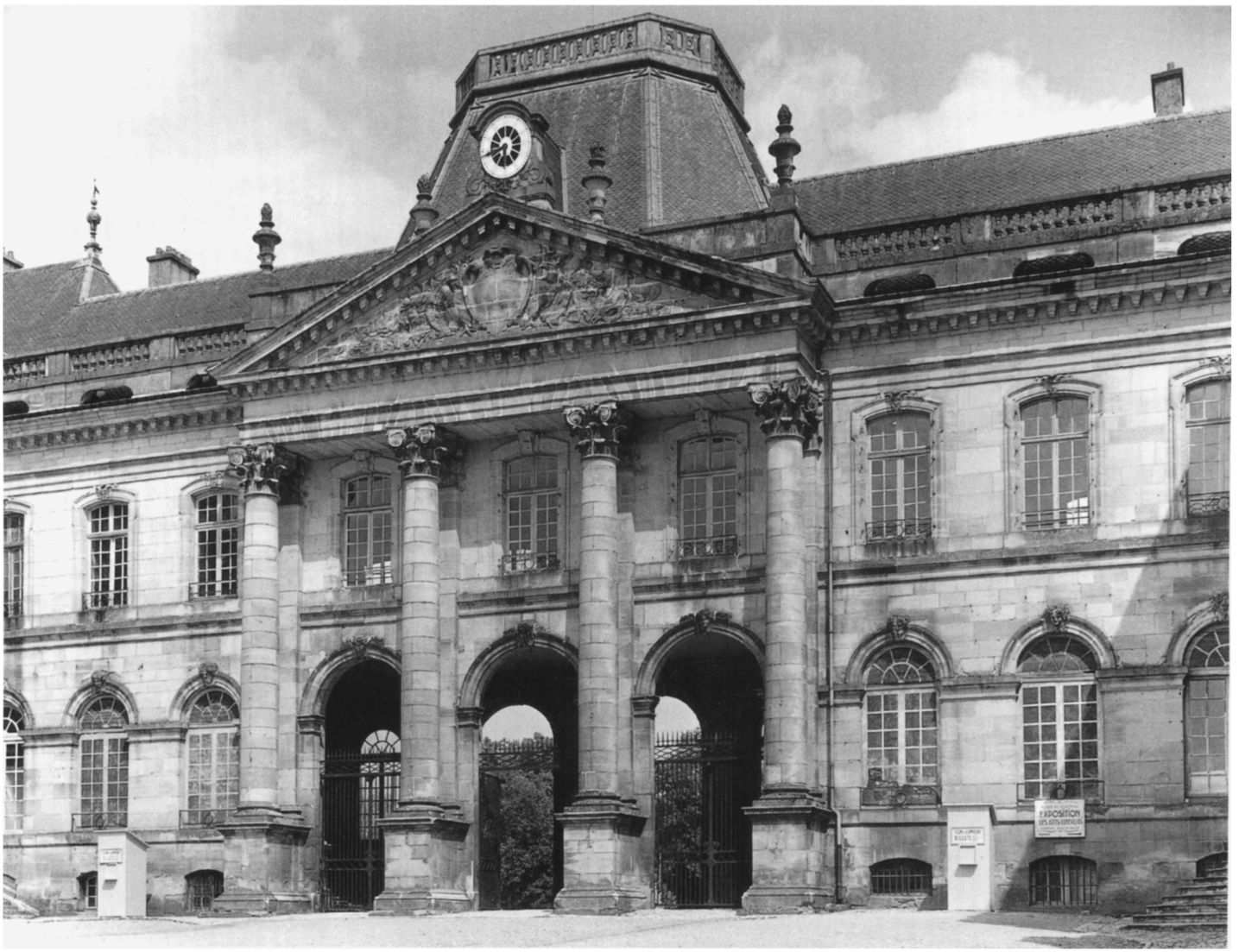

Château de Lunéville, with its façade decorated with theatrical masks

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Book of Architecture

CONTAINING
THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE ART
AND THE PLANS, ELEVATIONS AND SECTIONS
OF SOME OF THE EDIFICES BUILT IN FRANCE
AND IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY CAROLINE VAN ECK
TRANSLATED BY DAVID BRITT

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David Britt died as this book went into production. He was unrivalled as a translator of architectural theory, as his translations of *Le Camus de Mézières* and *Semper* show. His death, which came far too soon, is a great loss to architectural history.

Introduction

Boffrand's *Livre d'Architecture* is a work of great originality. It presents a view of architecture as theatre based on Horace's *Art of Poetry*. It introduces the concepts of style and character, which would play such a prominent role in subsequent architectural theories. Unlike the majority of treatises published since the foundation of the Académie Royale d'Architecture in 1671, it is not a handbook addressed to students of architecture; its main issue is not the correct handling of the orders or technical matters such as stone-cutting, but the aesthetics of architecture. Yet despite these innovations, Boffrand's theory is not simply the starting point for late eighteenth-century aesthetics of character, or the battle of the styles. The meaning he gave to style and character is derived from Classical rhetoric; the prominent role he gave to Horace's *Art of Poetry* as the foundation of his own views clearly marks him as an Ancient in the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns; and his admiration for French Gothic was not an invitation to include the Gothic among the building styles from which an architect could choose. Classical architecture remained the norm for Boffrand. Like his buildings, which have variously been described as Palladian, baroque, rococo and neo-Classical, his treatise eludes easy classification in terms of a contribution to the aesthetics of character or association, the downfall of Vitruvianism, the rise of neo-Classicism or the birth of stylistic pluralism. Instead, this architectural theory deserves to be studied in its own right, not just for the new light it throws on the development of French architectural theory in the eighteenth century. For answers to his search for the foundations of taste and beauty, and the rules of style, character and expression Boffrand looked to the Classical doctrines of rhetoric and poetics. But in doing so, he did not indulge in an exercise of antiquarian interest. He addressed the relation between a building and its beholder, considered both as a problem of visual perception and in the psychological and rhetorical terms of the emotional impact of a building on its beholders, and in doing so he addressed a series of related topics that are central to any theory or aesthetics of architecture.

GERMAIN BOFFRAND: LIFE AND WORK

Germain Boffrand was born in 1667 in Nantes (Bretagne). His father was an architect and sculptor; his mother was a sister of the lawyer, playwright and *valet de chambre du roi* Philippe Quinault (1635–88), who is now chiefly remembered as the author of the libretto for *Armide*, which was set to music by both Lully and Gluck. Quinault brought Boffrand to Paris at the age of 14 to learn design – although he also wrote for the theatre, as is shown by the comedies written in his early years and the biography of his uncle, which he published in 1715.[1] Quinault introduced him to the world of the Court at Versailles and in the salons of Paris. Initially he studied with the sculptor Girardon, but in 1685 he transferred to the office of Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646–1708), great-nephew and pupil of François Mansart, the successor of Louis le Vau as Louis XIV's architect at Versailles and the designer of the Invalides. Boffrand started work with Mansart as a draughtsman, later to become clerk of works on the execution of the first version of Hardouin-Mansart's designs for the Place Louis le Grand (now Place Vendôme), of which very little survives to the present day. He left Mansart's office in 1699. Because he had no chance of succeeding Mansart in the office of the Bâtiments du Roi, Boffrand set out on a career as an independent architect and surveyor.

Boffrand is often considered to be the greatest French architect of the first half of the eighteenth century. He was a man of great originality and versatility. His architectural activities included not only urban projects, the design of town and country houses, palatial residences and interior design, but also mines, bridges and hospitals, contracting and property speculation. His formal language is characterized by a preference for volumes and intact wall surfaces on the one hand, and for the Classical orders on the other, but he did not try to fuse them in the baroque way. Instead, he stressed the symbolic – and as we shall see, the emotional and representational – role of the orders. In his preoccupation with giant orders, the opposition of masses and the expressive power of unadorned walls he continued the work of François Mansart and Le Vau, which had been overshadowed at the end of the seventeenth century by academicism. His plans are often masterpieces of originality, distinguished by his innovation of the 'annular' plan, which he used for the first time in the Hôtel d'Argenson of 1704–5. Instead of the traditional transversal axis linking vestibule and salon to the garden and often creating large vistas, he placed the apartments in a circular pattern around the central court of the house. This is done most radically in the Hôtel d'Amelot (also known as the Hôtel de

Montmorency), where the court is in the shape of an oval, with the apartments curving around it in the interesting shapes of a pentagon, trapezoid, rectangle and ellipse, culminating in a salon overlooking the garden, which could only be reached after walking through the entire suite of rooms. It may not have been very practical, but it assured that the visitor would experience a very carefully directed sequence of spaces (see below, Plates XXVII–XXX).

Boffrand's work can be divided into two periods. The years around 1720 were the turning-point: in 1719 he was ruined by the crash of John Law's Mississippi Company, because of political events he no longer received large commissions from Lorraine, and he did not participate in the expansion of Parisian hôtel building of the 1720s. Before 1720 he designed mainly palaces and private houses, both for French patrons and for foreign princes such as the Elector of Bavaria and the Duke of Lorraine. His Parisian clients included the Princesse de Condé, the Prince de Rohan and the mistress of the Duke of Orléans; but his most original hôtels were built on his own account, as a speculation, and sold afterwards to the nobility and bourgeoisie. As a speculator he played an important role in the development of the faubourgs Saint-Germain and Saint-Honoré and the Place Vendôme. In the second half of his career, which lasted until his death in 1754, he was occupied with town-planning, technical and theoretical work.

He made his name with the Hôtel Le Brun in the Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine, which he built in 1700 for the nephew of the painter Charles Le Brun, who was married to a daughter of Quinault. This was distinguished by an unusually compact outline, a pediment set against bare walls, windows without surrounds, and a garden frontispiece which protruded through the main cornice without any attempt at easing the transition. It represented a move away from Mansart and towards Palladio and is already typical of Boffrand's style.[2]

His next work was the Hôtel d'Argenson (1704–5) for the mistress of the Duke of Orléans, built in the gardens of the Palais-Royal. This brought him into contact with the Elector Maximilian II Emanuel of Bavaria and Duke Leopold I of Lorraine. From the Elector he received a commission to build a hunting lodge at Bouchefort near Soignies in Belgium (1705). The Elector had to flee at the advance of the imperial armies in 1706, and the building of the lodge never progressed beyond the earliest preparations. Judging from the plates in the *Livre d'Architecture* (II–VI), it was based on Palladio's Villa Rotonda at Vicenza, but the lodge is characterized as a symbol of princely power and display through its position, occupying the centre of a series of subsidiary buildings housing the stables, kitchens and dog kennel, which radiate out to the sides. It has an outline full of variety and great spatial differentiation in the arrangement of the interior, in which rectangular, octagonal and round rooms alternate. Although it copied from the Villa Rotonda the central dome and four porticoes with columns, the resemblance with the original is much more marked in the groundplan than in the elevation. In Boffrand's design the walls and porticoes are differentiated because the protruding porticoes throw sharp and heavy shadows, and the relation between the mass of the dome and the rest of the façade is very different from that at Vicenza, with the dome almost looming over the walls instead of gracefully presiding over them. Although Bouchefort did not have much influence in France, it became the starting point in Germany for a wide range of summer pavilions and hunting lodges because of its baroque liveliness and variety.

His work for the Duke of Lorraine in the next decade was more successful. In fact, Boffrand introduced French contemporary architecture in Lorraine, which until then had looked to Italy.[3] The Duke, who was married to a French princess, modelled his court on Versailles. He set out on an ambitious building programme, and the palaces of Lunéville, Nancy and La Malgrange, together with country seats such as that at Haroué and town houses at Nancy, were to occupy Boffrand for the next 15 years. He made two designs for the country house at Malgrange, both of which were included in the *Livre* (see Plates XII–XXIII). The first is a development of the type represented by Vaux-le-Vicomte, but enlarged along a transverse axis by a staircase and chapel with adjoining inner courtyards. Building started in 1712 but was abandoned in 1715, and the carcass was pulled down in 1738. The second project, which was never even begun, was a rather different affair. Its plan is X-shaped and orientated on its short side. Its source is probably a design by Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach for a country residence for Count Althan of 1690, which may have reached Boffrand through the connections between the Duke of Lorraine and the Viennese emperor, or by reason of the presence of the *architetto teatrale* Antonio Galli Bibiena in Nancy in 1708–9 to build an opera house. In Fischer von Erlach's design there is the same combination of a centralized middle section with long projecting wings, but it is distinguished from this possible model by the transversal axiality that results from Boffrand's orientation on the short side. Because of this orientation a grand central axis runs through the entire building, uniting guardrooms, staircase, three-storeyed rotunda, dining room and portico in one vast, unbroken perspective. This scheme has no parallels or followers in France, but it was used again two decades later in Juvarra's design for the Palazzina at Stupinigi.

In Nancy his designs for the Duke's palace did not fare much better than La Malgrange. Building was started in 1717 but abandoned in 1722 because of lack of money. The Hôtel de Beauveau or De Craon on the Place de la Carrière was built however after 1715, and survives (see Plates XLII–XLIV). It is located between the palace and the city wall and is an integral part of Boffrand's project for redesigning the Place de la Carrière, reflecting in its façade the side pavillions of the new Palace in the use of giant pilasters over a rusticated ground floor. On the opposite side of the square King

Stanislas, the successor to the dukes of Lorraine, had a similar palace built in 1752 as a Stock Exchange, thus completing Boffrand's original plan of a sequence of oval and rectangular spaces, which was one of the grandest baroque urban schemes outside Italy.

In 1719 Boffrand lost a large part of his fortune in the speculations of the bank of John Law. His reputation as an architect had not suffered, however, and in 1723 he was invited by the prince-bishop of Würzburg to submit designs for a new residence and for the Schönborn chapel in the cathedral. But the prince-bishop suddenly died in the same year, and contacts were broken off.

Meanwhile, Boffrand had become Ingénieur des Ponts-et-Chaussées in 1723, architect and director of the Hôpital Général in Paris, for which he produced the well and reservoir at Bicêtre (1733–40) and his last completed work, the Foundling Hospital of 1746–51 opposite Notre Dame.[4] In 1742 he became Premier Ingénieur des Ponts-et-Chaussées; in 1743 Inspecteur Général. One of the most interesting projects of these decades is the reconstruction in 1720–23 of the palace chapel at Lunéville, which had been destroyed by fire in 1719. This is an important and singular building, not only in Boffrand's career but also in the history of French church building and changing attitudes towards Gothic architecture. It was originally based on the chapel at Versailles, but the final result differs considerably from that model: a hall-church with one oval end instead of the basilica-based plan at Versailles; a two-storeyed elevation instead of three storeys; a quiet, spacious series of free-standing columns instead of the alternance of pilasters and columns; and instead of the busy ornamentation at Versailles an interior that is almost bare. This radical departure in church design was related by Robin Middleton in 1962 to the Abbé de Cordemoy's *Nouveau Traité de toute l'Architecture*, in which the Abbé argued that architectural design should consist of simple, clear and independent elements with an evident constructional function. The column with horizontal entablature was the main structural element; he rejected piers, pilasters and moulded cornices. This implied a rejection of the dominant system as used, for instance, in Vignola's Gesù in Rome, where the decorative function of the orders prevailed. Instead, Cordemoy's position came quite close to Greek architecture, though like Boffrand he admired the lightness and structural ingenuity of Gothic architecture. For Cordemoy, the Greek and the Gothic used the same principle of a succession of tall and slender supports that rhythmically articulated unconstricted and open spaces.[5] The chapel at Lunéville offers such an unconstricted, bare space, articulated by free-standing columns supporting an unbroken entablature.

Among Boffrand's surviving later works the interior design of the Hôtel de Soubise (1735) is perhaps the most famous. In the interiors at Malgrange he had already shown great originality in supplying a decorative scheme that did not show any architectonic or functional articulation. The only panelling occurred at the foot of walls, but above them the walls were simply smooth surfaces with very little organizing moulding, displaying series of atlantes and festoons of trophies. This was completely new at the time, and it introduced a nonfunctional and atectonic system of decoration in which neither panels nor pilasters were needed to support it. In his designs for the oval salons of the Prince and the Princesse de Soubise he made use of all the visual arts to strengthen the overall impression of his decorative schemes. He created a synthesis of panelling, sculpture and painting, in which architectural thinking underlies the rococo profusion. His decorations were lavished on a basic pattern of spandrels between the arcades of the windows and doors. These curved frames create zones of continuous undulation that go round the room and give three-dimensional accents to the entire white and gold scheme. In the salon of the Princess this is crowned by a light, rising dome with open balustrades, which leads the eye upwards and forms the end of this swirling abundance of forms. It may be overwhelming, but in the way the architecture of the building gives an underlying structure to the ornament and directs the gaze of the spectator, it clearly shows the hand of a master.

The Hôpital des Enfants-Trouvés on the Ile de la Cité, opposite Notre Dame (1746–51; demolished 1874), was Boffrand's last building. Its interior decoration was again quite original: Brunetti and Natoire painted the chapel of the Foundling Hospital to represent a ruin, with children and nuns shown looking at the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi. (Boffrand was the teacher of Clérisseau, the great ruin painter, at the Académie Royale.)

Boffrand's mastery of plans also shows in his urban designs, none of which were executed according to his original designs. Among his last works were his entry for the competition held for the new Place Royale (now Place de la Concorde) and a scheme for the square in front of Notre Dame. For the latter, Boffrand was instructed by the Board of Trustees to demolish the old Hôtel-Dieu and to rebuild it together with an orphanage. He proposed to open up the square and provide a street running up to the middle of the façade of the church, with the orphanage on one side and the hospital on the other, and an open space in front of Notre Dame. In fact, only the Foundling Hospital was built in 1746, but if completed Boffrand's scheme would have shown his characteristic contrasts of relatively flat wall surfaces and a giant pilaster order, and would have created an urban space in which the Gothic church would have been counter-balanced by his own brand of neo-Palladian design. His scheme for the Place Dauphine suggested a town hall with two forward curving wings flanking a giant triumphal arch, which would serve as a backdrop for a 'Colonne Ludovise' modelled on Trajan's column in Rome. The entire façade would be unified by the use of one giant order resting on a rusticated ground floor pierced by gates. In its larger-than-life dramatization of stone walls, support and weight-bearing, it seems to announce Semper's second Dresden Opera, but again it came to nothing for lack of funding.

Boffrand died in Paris in 1754 of an attack of apoplexy. Pierre

Patte, who had been his student, wrote of him that his manner of thinking was both grand and unselfish. His conversation was lively and full of interest in his interlocutors, his character moderate and easy-going, and he took a great interest in what happened around him until his extreme old age; despite the great number of buildings he erected, he had not enriched himself.[6]

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Boffrand was an author as well as an architect. Apart from the *Livre d'Architecture* he regularly submitted addresses on architectural theory and more practical matters to the Académie Royale d'Architecture, of which he had become a member in 1709; most of these have not survived.[7] Not much is known about the genesis of Boffrand's book. It was presented to the Académie d'Architecture in December 1742 and approved, but Boffrand had already read a paper to that audience in which he applied the precepts of Horace's *Art of Poetry* to architectural design in August 1734. He gave such a lecture again in 1743 and 1753, always to great approval by his colleagues. In 1734 he read a paper on taste; in 1744 on the proportions of superimposed orders and their optical corrections.[8]

Not much is known either about the reception of the *Livre d'Architecture* at the time of its publication. Because of its inclusion of both town and country houses and civil engineering projects, it seems to be addressed to Boffrand's fellow architects rather than the architectural amateur or prospective client. Because of its use of French and Latin, and its inclusion of abstract discussions of the aesthetic principles of architecture derived partly from Horace, it seems intended for a European educated audience and not, like so many eighteenth-century pattern books, for artisans or contractors. Two editions survive: one in French and Latin (on which this edition is based) and one that has only the Latin version.[9]

Boffrand's book is not a treatise devoted to practical matters such as the selection of materials or masonry techniques, or even the correct proportions of the orders. Instead, the unifying theme throughout the entire book is the quest for the principles of good taste and beauty. In this emphasis on the aesthetics of architecture it closely resembles the *Traité d'Architecture* of 1714 by Sebastien Le Clerc.[10]

Boffrand's choice of topic fits in with the preoccupations of the Académie de Royale d'Architecture from its foundation in 1671 by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the minister of finance and building under Louis XIV.[11] The Académie's task was to formulate an official doctrine derived from a study of Roman buildings and the treatises of Vitruvius and the Renaissance masters; to propagate this doctrine in its teaching activities; and to act as the official representative of French architects and defend the architectural profession against building contractors.[12] One part of its doctrinal task was to establish the correct proportions of the orders; another to define good taste. In the opening session on 31 December 1671 François Blondel, the first president of the Académie, had declared that defining good taste would be the objective of the first meeting of the members of the Académie.[13] In the next sessions they agreed that in order to learn about taste one should consider what pleases intelligent persons who are distinguished by their works and writings.[14] This line of reasoning was hardly promising, but the issue was made even more problematic when the Académie linked the definition of good taste to the question of whether proportion in architecture is based on positive or arbitrary rules, introduced by custom and habit.[15] Initially, opinions were divided. Although the majority believed in objective qualities, some did not, and it was therefore resolved that their arguments should be discussed, and that the views of the major Classical treatises should be studied.

Nine years later, the Académie again discussed the nature of taste, this time in the presence of its founder, Colbert. All the members agreed that good taste was based on real and positive qualities of the objects that please, even though they acknowledged that many things pleased only because they were put in practice by respected persons. These qualities were 'a certain arrangement, number, disposition, majesty and proportion of all parts that together produce that harmonious union that we call beauty'.[16]

But the discussion continued. In 1702 beauty resulting from good taste was defined as 'the most simple relation between all the parts which makes itself more easily known to the soul, and gives it more satisfaction.'[17] Instead of an objective aesthetics of proportion, based on measurable qualities of the building, the Académie now leaned towards a view of beauty that also included the emotional effect on the beholder of easily recognizable relationships between the parts of a building.[18] As a definition of beauty or good taste this was hardly more satisfying than the Académie's initial appeal to the judgment of intelligent persons distinguished by their writings or works of art, because it failed to show clearly what this 'most simple relation' was.

The Académie was not very successful, either, in the other part of its attempts to establish the rules of Classical design, the establishment of the correct proportions of the orders. It had decided that these rules should be derived from a study of Roman buildings and Classical treatises. This double approach immediately led to problems, because the measurements of Roman buildings conflicted with the measures given in the treatises. Requests sent by the Académie to Rome for new measurements of key monuments (which resulted, for example, in Antoine Desgodets's *Edifices Antiques de Rome, dessinés et mesurés très exactement* of 1682) did not help, because the measurements conflicted both with the old ones and with those given in the treatises.[19] The solution adopted by the Académie and recorded in the *Cours d'Architecture* by François Blondel (published in 1675–83) was to give precedence to the general principles of theory over the inconsistencies of practice.[20] This of course did not really solve the problem, and the search for correct