The idea of architecture and the origins of the primitive hut

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The *Idea* of Architecture and the Origins of the Primitive Hut
Maarten Delbeke

This contribution advances the hypothesis that the emergence of the primitive hut in architectural discourse in the mid-eighteenth century coincided with the definition of *architecture* as an abstraction, an entity that can be understood and thought independently from concrete examples rooted in history and practice but that relies on "theory" for its existence. This "architecture" is an art, like painting and sculpture, but unlike its sisters has no direct model in nature. If in painting and sculpture "theory" serves to explain how models relate to their representation, in architecture it operates on a different level: as the demarcation of an ideal subject. This subject is visualized by means of the primitive hut, a vehicle that allows us to imagine relationships between this idea and more concrete models, such as Greek architecture or nature. The primitive hut is thus concomitant with the emergence of "architecture" as a notion that encompasses but does not coincide with the art of building, the system of the orders, the rules of proportion, the types of public and private buildings, and building methods, because it designates a realm that can be defined only by means of "theory."

This is the claim Marc-Antoine Laugier puts forward in the introduction to his *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753), and the following pages outline a genealogy of this idea using specific examples from the history of French architectural theory. By sketching this highly selective—and therefore debatable—genealogy, I want to put up for discussion some implications of this claim. According to this genealogy, "architecture" emerged as a theoretical construct in eighteenth-century France in relation to specific and closely connected discussions about ornament and taste. If this is the case, it is worth asking to what extent these discussions defined the figure of the hut. This is not merely a matter of historicizing the primitive hut but of understanding the stakes in making "architecture" the subject of "theory" rather than history.

Perrault's *Abrégé* and the Origins of the Primitive Hut

"[D]ans cet Abrégé on a mis seulement ce qui peut servir précisément à l'Architecture." [1] With these words Claude Perrault distinguishes his *Abrégé* (summary) of Vitruvius's *Ten Books on Architecture* from its source, the ancient treatise that Perrault himself had translated, edited, and published. In Perrault's view, the sole purpose of much of Vitruvius's original text was to buttress the authority of its author. As a man of limited practice and little dexterity in the ways of the court, writing at a time when architects were held in low esteem, Vitruvius had relied on displays of

Maarten Delbeke is Professor of the Histroy and Theory of Architecture at ETH Zurich.

Note: This essay tests an idea that warrants far more careful and elaborate historical considerations, and explicit engagement with earlier work on the authors discussed here. I hope to do so in the near future. References to secondary literature are limited to contributions on which I have relied for specific historical points. My understanding of Laugier is indebted to my conversations with Richard Wittman, my thinking on the primitive hut has been sharpened by teaching with Berthold Hub, and some of the source material has been collected by Linda Bleijenberg. Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

1 Claude Perrault, preface to *Abrégé des dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve* (Paris: Coignart, 1674), 1–12, here 9–10.

education and erudition to convince his readers of his credibility. Had he not done so, Perrault states, "the precepts that he has left us would not have *the authority they require*." **2** With a trademark backhanded compliment to the ancient author, Perrault declares that at the time of his own writing, in the 1670s, Vitruvius's authority had become so firmly established as to render the original armature of the *Ten Books* superfluous. Stripping Vitruvius's text of its now perfunctory erudition would open the way to dealing only with "all that can serve specifically to architecture."

Perrault published his *Abrégé des dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve* in 1674, one year after his critical translation of the *Ten Books on Architecture*. The *Abrégé* followed the ancient practice of excerpting authoritative works—*auctoritates*—into more manageable collections of citations. **3** The extracts collected in the *Abrégé* are identified by means of marginal references to the original. These fragments become a running text through the insertion of Perrault's own comments. Placed between quotation marks, that "which is added ... to link the discourse and to render it more clear" is clearly distinguished from what is "drawn" directly from Vitruvius. **4** Thanks to this efficient and transparent editorial strategy, the *Abrégé* provides fast and reliable access to key fragments of Vitruvius's treatise.

If this strategy is probably a sufficient explanation for the success of the *Abrégé*, its actual effect on architectural discourse might hinge as much on some of its inevitable side effects. Perrault's editorial strategy imposes a particular reading on Vitruvius's foundational text. In fact, Perrault's assessment of the ultimately limited value of the entire body of the *Ten Books* implies a fundamental reconfiguration of its subject. Perrault distinguishes that which belongs to "architecture" from that which is accessory to it. The body of knowledge that pertains to Vitruvius as a historical agent is separate from but attendant to another entity, "architecture." The existence of this entity does not depend on the historical agent, Perrault suggests, but seems to find its rationale in a realm of its own.

The division between the subject of "architecture" and the contingencies of its articulation is further enacted in the structure of the *Abrégé*. Perrault organizes the work in two sections, the first treating those questions that matter to modern and ancient architecture alike, the second about what pertains to ancient architecture alone. The first part thus offers a systematic explanation of architecture, while the second provides a historical treatment. The ancient building types Vitruvius discusses, Perrault writes, belong to the second part; they might be studied as historical examples that sharpen one's judgment and foster erudition, but they hold

2 Ibid., 6. My emphasis.

3 The best recent discussion of the *Abrégé* is Olga Medvedkova, "Un 'Abrégé' moderne ou Vitruve selon la méthode," in *La Construction savante—Les Avatars de la littérature technique: Actes du colloque "Les Avatars de la littérature technique, formes imprimées des savoirs liés à la construction," organisé par le Centre d'Histoire des Techniques et de l'Environnement du Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers et l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art en mars 2005*, eds. Jean-Philippe Garric, Valérie Nègre, and Alice Thomine-Berrada (Paris: Picard, 2008), 43–53.

4 Perrault, avertissement to *Abrégé* (see note 1), n.p.

no direct relevance for contemporary practice. Knowledge of the properties of stone, on the other hand, does remain relevant to the moderns, just like the composition of the orders, and is therefore treated in the first part.

Following the logic of Perrault's dismantling of Vitruvius's textual edifice, these are the topics that constitute the real subject of architecture, built from elements and principles that transcend history. Perrault's construction of "architecture," however, immediately raises important questions. What is "architecture" if not the name for a collection of historical artifacts? What determines its elements and principles, and what is their exact nature? If they are not bound to history, where can they be found? Once they are established, what exactly do they define or constitute? Or, simply put, what is this "architecture" that the *Abrégé* intends to treat "specifically"? Perrault does not address these questions head on, but he offers a first — implicit — blueprint for a figure of thought that would become crucial to their treatment: the primitive hut.

That Perrault finds reason to discuss the origins of architecture in an *Abrégé* that claims to strip the *Ten Books* of anything that is not strictly necessary to an understanding of "architecture" is in itself remarkable. After all, Vitruvius's account of the origins of building in Book II can be read as a quite imprecise history that is far too elaborate for its ostensible purpose: explaining how building depends on the materials nature provides. The actual purport of Vitruvius's origin story is to intertwine the emergence of architecture as an art with the origins and development of civilization, a matter more relevant to the authority of the architect and the legitimacy of architecture than to actual building practice. The ancient author's discussion of the origins of the orders, or *genera*, and some of their ornaments (mainly the Doric entablature and the Corinthian capital) in Book IV again offers histories that are too extensive for the implicit hints about decorum they contain. Vitruvius's different origin stories thus seem to belong exactly to the kind of erudition that has only an indirect relevance for "architecture" but serves to bolster the author's claim on authority.

By treating the origin of architecture in the introductory section of the *Abrégé*, Perrault seems to acknowledge its importance in the definition of architecture. Still, he reduces Vitruvius's extensive histories about the origin of civilization to an absolute minimum, framed with qualifiers such as "it is said" or "claimed that." Instead, Perrault offers in his own voice an account where architecture emerged from the imitation of first natural and then artificial models: "just like trees and rocks and other things that nature provides of itself had been taken as model ... so the same

5 Perrault, *Abrégé* (see note 1), 23.

6 The passages in question are Book II.1 (on the origins of building), IV.2 (on the Doric entablature), and V.1 (on the superposition of columns in imitation of tapering trees).

7 On the removal of the quotation marks in subsequent editions, see Medvedkova, "Un 'Abrégé' moderne" (see note 3).

way was used in order to arrive at something more perfect: since by passing from the imitation of the natural to that of the artificial, all ornaments of buildings were invented." [5] This process is illustrated with Vitruvius's various passages dealing with origins of building elements and is followed by a third stage where these ornaments are structured according to the different orders.

Perrault makes good on his promise of efficiency by combining related but dispersed passages in Vitruvius into a single section of the *Abrégé*. But the logic of this editorial operation should not mask its radicality. To my knowledge, it marks the *Abrégé* as the first publication treating the separate origin myths recorded in Books II, IV, and V as components of a single narrative. [6] This gesture would be reinforced in subsequent editions of the *Abrégé*, which do not signal Perrault's editorial intervention by means of quotation marks, eliding the distinction between the voices of Vitruvius and his editor and further streamlining Perrault's montage of Vitruvian fragments. [7]

The implications of this new construction are important. Rather than pertaining to a body of unrelated but situated histories, the origin of architecture becomes the subject of systematic development. Contrary to Vitruvius's excursus on the primitive building practices found across the Roman Empire or in the stories about the origins of the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian *genera*, Perrault's origins involve an unlocalized process developing over an unspecified period of time. As a consequence, Perrault's new construct emphasizes the primacy of the apparently universal creative principle of imitation over the historical circumstances of its application. It is this principle that establishes "architecture." Two different but related forms of imitation—the imitation of nature and of artifacts—generate architecture and provide the ratio for its ornaments. Vitruvius's indications about the provenance of certain architectural elements are generalized into an overarching theory of imitation.

The *Idea* of Architecture and the Discipline of Ornament

Perrault's attempt to liberate "architecture" and its principles from the vicissitudes of history and its attendant mythology was rooted in increasing suspicion toward architectural practice as the prevailing benchmark for architectural beauty. The authority transferred onto contingent historical models was held responsible for the arbitrariness of architecture in the present. This point is made explicit in an important precursor to Perrault's endeavors, Roland Fréart de Chambray's *Parallèle de l'architecture antique et de la moderne*, published in 1650. The preface of Fréart's tract protests against the creative license pervading both the works of

uninformed artisans and architects who are driven by an unwarranted desire for novelty. Fréart situates the origin of this license in antiquity itself, when the Romans thought it fit to add to the three Greek orders two inventions of their own, the rustic and the composite. In Fréart's view, the rustic is vulgar, while the composite and its inherent hybridity opened the floodgates of invention and, thereby, creative license.
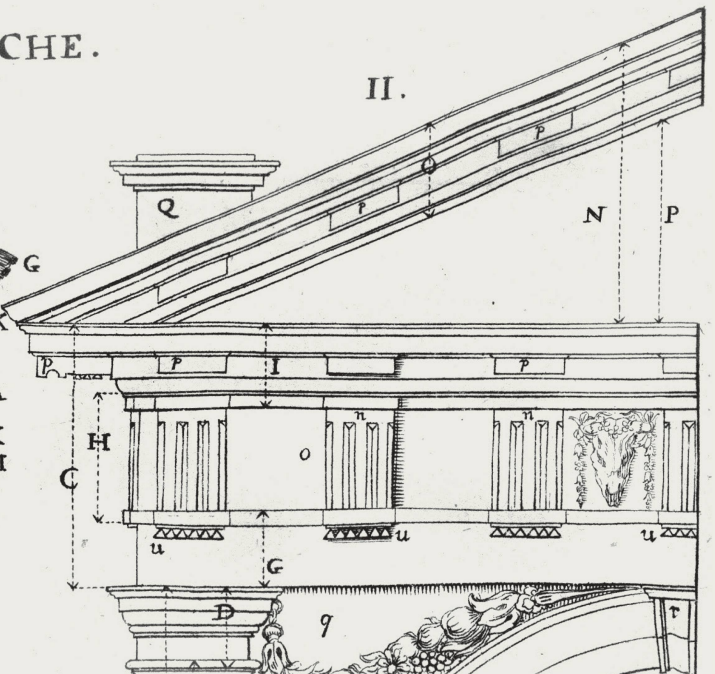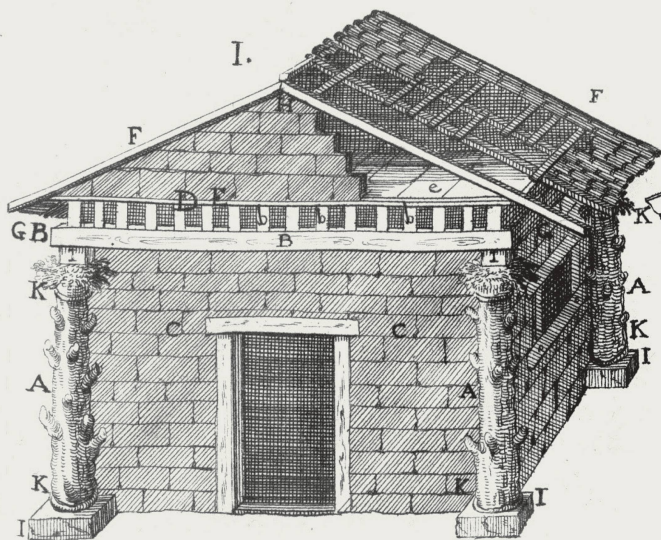
Fréart's answer to this state of affairs is an appeal for a return to the "sources" of architecture, the three Greek orders: "I would want, if it were possible, to reach back to the source of the orders, and draw there the most pure images and ideas of those admirable masters [Greek architects]." [8] The wording of Fréart's lamentation ("if it were possible") indicates the limited feasibility of his project: not only are the masters of old long dead but Greece is out of reach as well. Another century would pass before reliable representations of Greek monuments were made available in print, so whatever could be known in Fréart's day about the Greek orders had been transmitted through Roman architecture and its subsequent imitations. As a consequence, Fréart is unable to provide historical models of perfect architecture. He turns to a systematic comparison of the orders as they are found in ten "modern" authors and a highly selective sample of Roman monuments to provide a panorama that should "accustom" students to good examples. Tellingly, Fréart emphasizes the *difference* between his samples by providing back-to-back comparisons of the orders, so as to appeal to the judgment of the contemporary architect. This judgment is not sustained by individual preference—the gateway to license—but by "general approval": "by means of this comparison each has the liberty to choose according to his fantasy and to follow who he wants from the authors I propose, *because they are all commonly approved*." [9]

Fréart's attempt to extract architecture from the vicissitudes of practice and to establish sound rules that generate beauty leads him toward two principles. On the one hand, he turns to an elusive "source" of good architecture: the Greek orders in their purest and therefore irretrievable state. On the other hand, he validates the peer pressure of a professional community whose general approval limits individual license. These two principles stand in seeming contradiction: if the first is only historical in name but actually an abstract "idea of perfection," the other is rooted in the highly contingent professional realm of architectural practice. But these two principles actually work together, moving architecture away from historical examples as guides for design. Fréart suggests that the collective body of the profession—that is, not the artisans nor the individual designer but the community providing

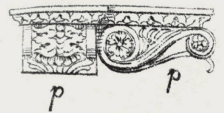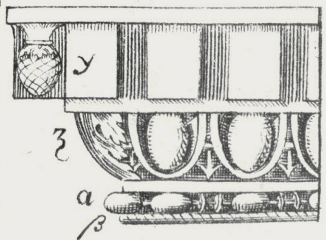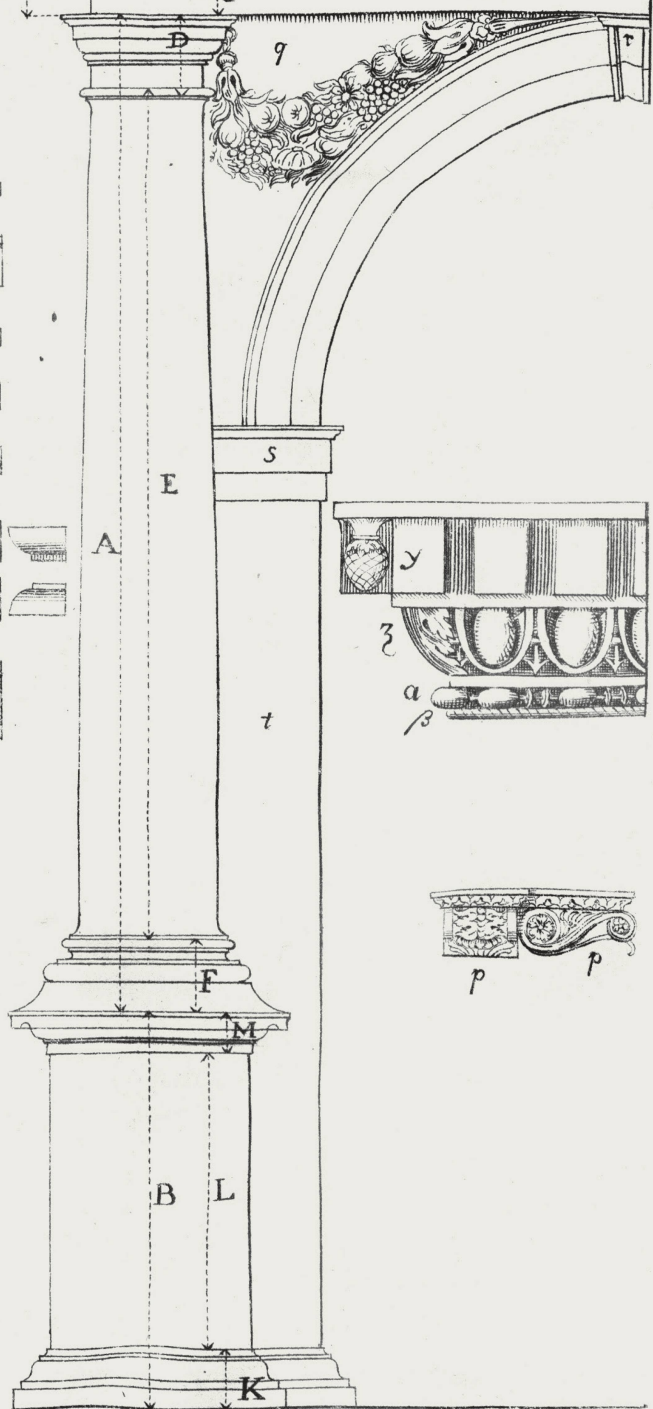[8] Roland Fréart de Chambray, *Parallèle de l'architecture antique et de la moderne* (Paris: Edme Martin, 1650), 2.
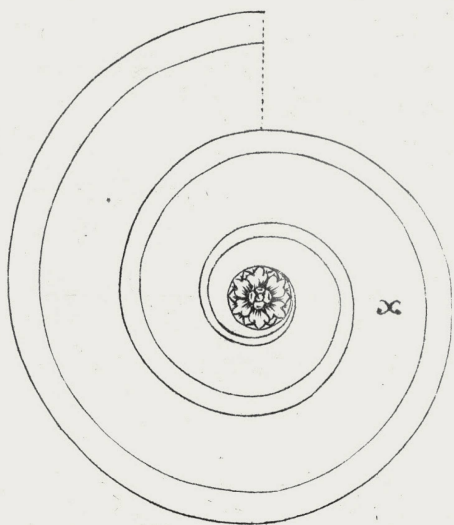
[9] Ibid., 5. My emphasis.

I.

II.

III.
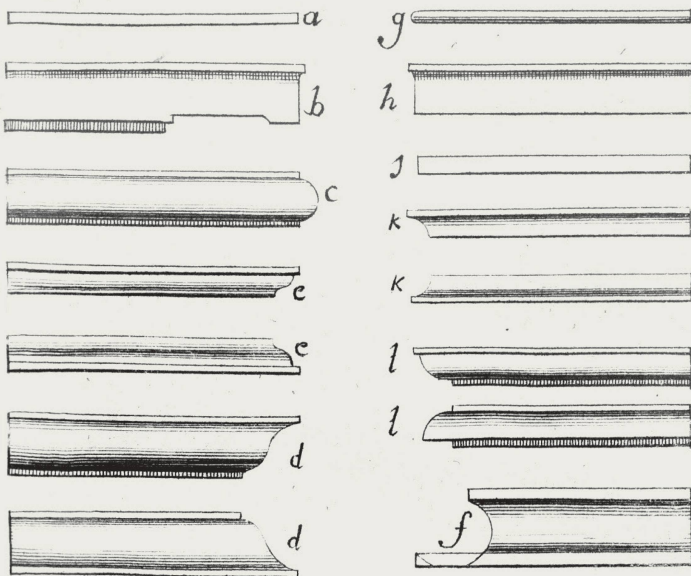
"general approval" — is capable of activating the good and the beautiful that lies hidden in the handpicked samples his *Parallèle* provides. To ensure the success of this procedure, Fréart heavily edits his chosen samples, providing detailed drawings of orders whenever his sources failed to do so, or "purifying" his historical examples, as when the Pantheon altar illustrating the Corinthian order is denuded of all references to its polychromic revetment. That is, his samples, too, are already abstractions from which an informed professional community is invited to operate. [10]

Fréart's point is taken up further by his Roman counterpart Giovanni Pietro Bellori in the latter's *Idea*, the introduction to the *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects* published in 1672. Bellori argues that all artists strive to imitate an "idea" of beauty — painters and sculptors by correcting the defects that nature inflicts on the forms found in reality; architects by remaining true to the principles of Greek architecture: "the Greeks instituted the norms and the best proportions for [architecture]; these, confirmed by the most educated ages and *by a consensus and succession of learned men*, became laws of a marvelous Idea and an ultimate beauty." [11] Again, an abstract and distant "idea" established by the Greeks is perpetuated through the ages by means of a consensus among professionals, which transfers the "idea" from one great building to another. This "idea" carries history, not the other way around.

The quest for an "idea" of architecture was rooted in historical circumstances. Fréart and Bellori were motivated by a deeply seated concern about contemporary attitudes toward ornament. Bellori writes of contemporary architects who indulge in a "nonsense of angles, broken elements, and distortions of lines, deforming buildings and the very cities and monuments; they break up bases, capitals, and columns with fakery of stuccoes, fragments, and disproportions." [12] In his brief discussion of the Pantheon altar, Fréart laments that most contemporary architects will judge his example to be "very poor," since they prefer to indulge in doubling, tripling, bending, and breaking every conceivable part of the architectural system. [13] For Fréart and Bellori, departure from the "idea" of architecture is most manifest in the abuse of ornaments, the "secondary" elements of which the orders are composed. These elements should be subjected to regulation by common approval and consensus by professionals schooled in the "idea" of architecture.

As a stalwart of the "moderns," Perrault is much less driven by the cultural pessimism that pervades Fréart's *Parallèle* or Bellori's *Idea*, which side firmly with the ancients. Neither is his version of the origin of architecture in the *Abrégé* motivated by a desire to

fig. 1 The first plate from François Blondel's *Cours d'architecture enseigné dans l'Académie royale d'architecture* (1675–1683).

10 On Fréart's editorial strategies, see Fréderique Lemerle, "Fréart de Chambray ou les enjeux du Parallèle," *XVIIe siècle* 49, no. 196 (1997): 419–53.

11 Gian Pietro Bellori, *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Alice Sedgwick Wohl (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61b. My emphasis.

12 Ibid., 62a–b.

13 Fréart de Chambray, *Parallèle* (see note 8), 82.

14 Claude Perrault, preface to *Les Dix livres d'architecture de Vitruve, corrigez et traduits nouvellement en François, avec des notes & des figures* (Paris: Coignard, 1673), n.p.: "[C]ar la beauté n'ayant guere d'autre fondement que la fantaisie, qui fait que les choses plaisent selon qu'elles sont conformes à l'idée que chacun a de leur perfection, on a besoin de regles qui forment & qui rectifient cette Idée."

15 Claude Perrault, preface to *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes selon la méthode des anciens* (Paris: Coignart, 1683), i–xxvii, here passim and esp. xxii–xxiii.

16 François Blondel, *Cours d'architecture enseigné dans l'Académie Royale d'Architecture* (Paris: de l'imprimerie Lambert Roulland, 1675), vol. 1, 2–4, with the quote on page 3. Given that the *Cours* records lectures given from 1672 onward, Blondel's version will have circulated before 1674. See also Joachim Gaus, "Die Urhütte: Über ein Modell in der Baukunst und ein Motiv in der bildenden Kunst," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 33 (1971): 7–70, who points out (18–19) that Palladio and Scamozzi prepared the notion of the primitive hut as a model. Fréart's translation of Palladio, especially of the chapter "on abuses" of Palladio's Book I, provides the crucial link between the Italian treatises and the French texts discussed here.

17 Amédée-François Frézier, *Dissertation sur les ordres d'architecture* (Strasbourg: Doulsseker, 1738), 12, included as an appendix to Amédée-François Frézier, *La Théorie et pratique de la coupe des pierres et des bois*, vol. 3 (Strasbourg: Doulsseker, 1739).

regulate architectural practice, as in the—ultimately unsuccessful—case of Fréart. Yet to some extent the *Abrégé* takes Fréart's position to a logical next step: if history offers only indirect access to the true principles of architecture and should therefore be handled with the greatest of care, then an attempt to lift "architecture" from its clutches makes sense. Crucially, in both the case of Fréart and Perrault this realization comes with a profound acknowledgment of the importance of professional or social consensus to regulate practice. Perrault's deconstruction of the *Ten Books* in the *Abrégé* makes exactly this point, because it historicizes Vitruvius's alleged attempt to garner approval for his treatise. In his translation of Vitruvius, Perrault emphasizes how human it is to crave the authority to buttress one's judgments and produce consensus. **14** In the *Ordonnance des cinq espèces de colonnes* of 1683, Perrault finally vindicates the profound contingency of aesthetic judgment in architecture, coupled with the human tendency to value these contingent judgments as absolute. In Perrault's view, this mechanism legitimizes his own reconstruction of a simple and "original" system for determining the proportions and ornaments of the orders, peeling away centuries worth of arbitrary solutions to the problem. **15** Like his "ancient" counterparts Fréart and Bellori, Perrault understands the fickleness manifest in all testimonies of architectural practice as a call to dig beyond history toward a system worthy of "architecture," which allows for the forging of consensus—good taste—in the present.

The *Idea* of Architecture and the Matter of Origins

Perrault's take on the origins of architecture in the *Abrégé* offers one possible version of this system: a process of imitation that generates the entire body of architectural ornament. In Perrault's telling, this process does not yet coalesce into a single artifact. Instead he evokes an undetermined process of imitation that eventually yields the basis for "architecture." One year after the publication of the *Abrégé*, François Blondel would propose the model of a primitive hut that emerges from the same process. He casts the hut as "the most simple and the most natural of all [manners of building], and which the ancient architects of Greece proposed to themselves as the model to imitate in their most beautiful edifices, and they have used all its members as a model." **16/fig.1** This model carried over into the eighteenth century. The *Dissertation sur les ordres de l'architecture*, first published in 1738 by Amédée-François Frézier and deeply indebted to Fréart, Perrault, and Blondel, circumscribes this process further: it becomes a "faithful imitation of natural architecture." **17** Echoing Perrault and especially Blondel, Frézier claims to follow Vitruvius's

ideas about the origin of building in order to argue that all orna-
ment is rooted in nature:

*"These origins are not an effect of my imagination, the most
famous architects agree about this on the basis of* Vitruvius, *who
said that the ancients haven't imagined anything except after
nature, and have recognized no other constant beauty than what
it drew from its origin. And it is of this simple and natural archi-
tecture that they have made the model for the decoration with
which they have dressed the most sumptuous buildings."* [18]

18 Ibid., 10.

Frézier finds further proof that all ornament is rooted in
"natural architecture" in the primitive constructions recorded by
history or retrieved in the colonies of his own day and age. These
examples induce Frézier to skip both the transition from the imi-
tation of nature to that of "artificial models," which in Perrault's
thinking is still a necessary step to understand how architec-
ture could emerge from the essentially nonarchitectural models
nature provides, and the intervention of Greek architects, who,
according to Blondel, were the true inventors of architecture. Now
only natural models remain.

It would fall to Laugier to propose the primitive hut as the
single and original embodiment of a now entirely natural process.
The erection of the *"cabane rustique* by primitive man ... is the
step of simple nature: it is to the imitation of her proceedings,
to which art owes its birth."* [19] In his *Essai sur l'architecture*, first
published anonymously in 1753, Laugier sets out to found archi-
tecture in "theory": rational principles dictated by nature itself.
Bemoaning the fact that architecture is the only art left without
such theory, still based on the imitation of historical models and
texts such as Vitruvius, Laugier attempts by means of an empirical
experiment to arrive at the principles that generate beauty. This
experiment, he implies, yields the primitive hut as the origin
and model for all architecture: four branches placed in a square,
forming posts, supporting a further four horizontal branches as
beams, covered with a wooden roof. [20]

19 Marc-Antoine
Laugier, *Essai sur
l'architecture* (Paris:
Duchesne, 1753), 12.

20 Ibid., preface and 12.

Thanks to Charles Eisen's frontispiece to the second edi-
tion of the *Essai*, Laugier's construct is perhaps too well known to
be looked at afresh. **fig.2** But its absurdity is worth considering.
Laugier proposes, as the final benchmark for determining whether
something is "architecture," a construction where

*"I can see nothing but columns, a floor or entablature; a
pointed roof whose two extremities each of them forms what we
call a pediment. As yet there is no arch, still less of an arcade,
no pedestal, no attic, not even a door, no window. I conclude
then with saying, in all the order of architecture, there is only the
column, the entablature, and the pediment that can essentially*

21 Ibid., 14–15. Translation adapted from Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture; In Which Its True Principles Are Explained* (London: Osborne and Shipton, 1755), 13.

enter into this composition. If each of those three parts are found placed in the convenient situation and form, there will be nothing to add for the work to be perfect." 21

As critics such as Giambattista Piranesi were quick to point out, this rustic hut is hardly a building, and the question of how this primitive structure relates to built architecture is a problem that pervades the very fabric of the *Essai*. Laugier essentially limits the applicability of the hut to his theory of the orders and the design of churches, which he imagines as glass-filled skeletons. And in order to transform huts into buildings, Laugier admits that the architect relies on the very elements he sought to regulate — "licenses," now understood as "the parts introduced out of necessity," such as walls and their openings. 22 These licenses are not determined by the principles of architecture embodied in the hut but, in essence, by taste — rules dictated by what Laugier deems to be common sense.

22 Laugier, *Essai* (see note 19), 24. Chapter 1, article 5 is dedicated to doors and windows.

Laugier's construct reifies the polarity governing architecture already encountered in Fréart and Perrault: between an abstract "idea" and the informed practice of its actualization. But it also performs an important inversion. The "idea" of architecture is now firmly materialized in a primitive construction of wooden posts and beams, while ornament — understood as the collection of "secondary" elements that give flesh to the building — literally disappears into the void. This inversion is made explicit in Eisen's frontispiece, where the personification of Architecture turns her back to fragments of ornaments in order to point out the hut. The architectural matter Fréart and Perrault saw as the testing ground of consensus, where "architecture" becomes real in the here and now, is by Laugier only grudgingly allowed out of "necessity."

The extraordinary afterlife of Laugier's hut suggests that this inversion holds an enormous appeal. It promises the existence of an "architecture" that is as easily imagined as it remains elusive in practice — an "architecture" that also lays claim to theory for its design but keeps its distance from reality; an "architecture" that is premised on its own contamination, not on its production by practice and contingency. As the materialized yet unattainable "idea" of architecture, the primitive hut allows this contamination to become legitimate to the extent that the contamination produces the legitimacy of "architecture" itself. Impurity becomes proof of the existence of an infallible "idea." "Theory" is complicit in this trade-off, as it defines the realm where "architecture" is thought to exist before or next to its contamination. The primitive hut holds out the promise that this trade-off is not only feasible but desirable.

fig. 2 Charles Dominique Joseph Eisen, design for the frontispiece of the second edition of Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture*, ca. 1755. Pen, ink, and gray wash on paper, 154 × 92 mm.

Gravelot