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**Francesca Prina: Architecture: Elements, Materials, Form**

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# Introduction

"The work of art is a private matter for the artist. The house is not." This declaration from Adolf Loos, the Austrian architect credited with giving birth to rationalism in architecture, can be taken as a summary of the idea of an architectural work. All too frequently considered only in terms of its historical and stylistic aspects, and overlooking its semantic aspects, architecture speaks to the viewer—who may in reality also be the inhabitant, user, passerby, or even destroyer—and does so with a highly precise grammatical language based on structural elements, materials, and techniques that are fitted together to make up the syntax of the building.

It is this highly particular aspect of architecture that this book illustrates, analyzing the elements of architecture and the symbolic meanings within it. Each section in the book calls out the principal structural components of buildings, by identifying their fundamental characteristics—from the column to the capital, from the wall to the dome—as well as the elements of an architectural organism: façade, doors, windows, stairs, and so on. While the primary purpose of architecture is to meet basic needs for shelter and protection, it accomplishes this goal through the use of the materials that nature makes available, and it is thus forced to observe closely the natural laws inherent in those materials. This material dependence on natural laws and limitations confers a certain necessary character on architecture. These elements are not simply accessories within the construction of an architectural work; they are indissolubly linked to the historical context, to the level of technological evolution, and to the personality of the architect. They become bearers themselves of the symbolic language of architectural images.

The book opens with a brief analysis of the preliminary phase of design, then discusses the translation of an imagined architectural program in terms of space and volume with the tools available to the architect, from the design to the actual project to the most modern systems of three-dimensional digital projection. This interrelationship between initial idea and eventual building solutions represents the truly creative activity through which an architectural work comes into being. Architecture is made by architects. Thus the characteristics of a certain physical and material world, along with its social dynamics, can be translated into architecture only through the mediation of the

architect, who, as a complex social being, bears within him- or herself a unique key to interpreting the world.

As for the choice of buildings illustrated, a certain preference has been given to works of European architecture. This has not, however, ruled out the inclusion of buildings from the Americas, Africa, and the Far East. The logic behind the organization of the entries varies as needed to fit the subject: the images illustrate the various themes being discussed and examine the evolution of forms, from the simplest to the most complex, without following a strict chronological order. At times the sequence coincides with chronology and at times it does not. However, an effort is always made to end with some non-Western examples. In some cases it was useful to contrast images from widely different periods in order to emphasize—over the centuries and across different cultures—the persistence of forms.

The book ends with a chapter dedicated to those buildings considered archetypes of architectural history, beginning with classical Greece, the cradle of Western culture, and ending with examples drawn from the Middle East and extending all the way to Japan. The goal is to assemble the fragmented language of architecture into a single coherent discourse, to fashion those many disparate ideas into a single guiding principle—which is nothing but the architectural organism itself. This is a matter not of traditional stylistic notions (although they inevitably do appear) but rather of the different ways of composing the architectural alphabet—creating a language that changes, a language that speaks of the geography of locales, the availability of funds, the patrons, the goals to be served, and the creative personalities involved.