



Court and Garden: From the French Hôtel to the City of Modern Architecture (Graham Foundation / MIT Press Series in Contemporary Architectural Discourse)

Michael Dennis

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The "tyranny of the private realm" is destroying our cities. Modern architecture, with its insistence on the mute object and its rejection of the conventions of street and square, has abdicated civic responsibility and eschewed the urban forms that express and promote it. In this eloquent and extensively illustrated study of the evolution of a modern conception of space, Michael Dennis explores the social, psychological, and especially the formal transformations that led architects to trade the city of public space for a city of private icons. The French *hôtel*, an aristocratic town house developed largely in Paris between 1550 and 1800, is a sophisticated instrument of urbanism that both chronicles the demise of the public realm and offers architectural techniques for reconstructing a spatially rich city. In its development from Italianate prototypes to an urban courtyard building and finally to a freestanding pavilion in a private garden, the French *hôtel* illustrates the transformation of the city from one of platonic voids to one of platonic solids, from one of buildings that define space to one of buildings that treat space as merely left over.

In reconstructing the origins of the modern city—and the modern sense of privacy—Dennis focuses on the plan of the *hôtel* and on the relationship between the external and internal organization of buildings. He identifies three distinct *hôtel* types—Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical—and examines the urban and social changes reflected in their sitings and facades and in such details as the sequence of public and private rooms, patterns of circulation, and the proliferation of rooms with special functions.

By studying the plans, Dennis asserts, modern architects can recapture the language of urbanism and learn how to reconcile modern and traditional modes of building organization and spatial development. The extensive documentation he provides—nearly 400 illustrations, including historical maps of Paris, *hôtel* plans, and photographs of extant *hôtels*—encourages that study and significantly extends the tradition of illustrated architectural treatises by Marot (c. 1670), Blondell (1752-1756) and Krafft (c. 1802), establishing this book as the definitive scholarly work on the French *hôtel*.

A Graham Foundation Book.

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