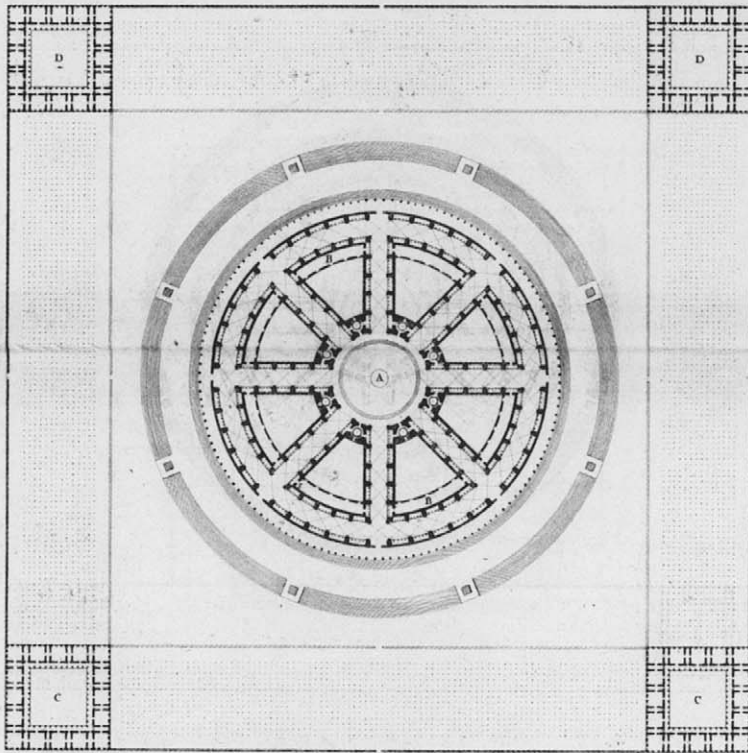
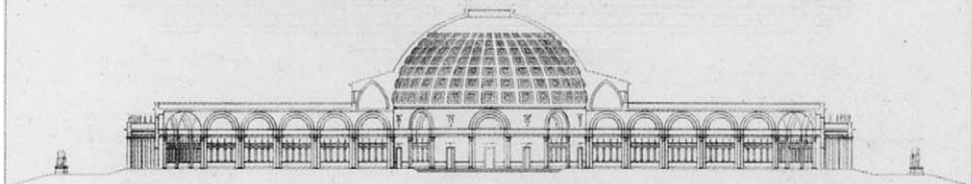
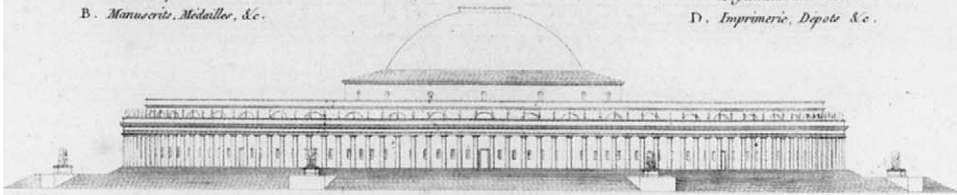


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A. Bibliothèque.
 B. Manuscrits, Médailles, &c.

C. Logement des Bibliothecaires.
 D. Imprimerie, Depot &c.



Can we describe how we design?

Left
J-N-L Durand, *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École Polytechnique*, 1802 & 1805; plate 10

The first and impulsive answer to the question is 'no'. We believe that design is a mysterious and individual activity which is beyond description; it happens but is not amenable to analysis. The same could be said of a great number of human activities but we do not immediately conclude that they are beyond description. A large segment of the population is, for example, engaged in some economic activity. The underlying description of that activity, of its basic organisation, may not be agreed but both free-market proponents and Marxists would hold that a theory – an explanation – can, perhaps must, exist. What is more, the way economic activity is conducted will depend a great deal on which theory is held to be operative. Theory and practice are not unrelated matters.

By analogy, can there be theories of design? 'Theories' is advisedly used in the plural on the assumption that there is unlikely to be a single all-embracing theory which is able to explain the process of design at all adequately. Theory is here meant not as the antithesis of practice but in the sense of explanation, that is in the sense that it is normally used in science to describe a series of related phenomena.

It is important at this stage to make a very clear distinction between a design theory and design methodology. A theory is, at least initially, a non-prescriptive explanation which does not have an architectural end in view. Design methodology, on the other hand, describes specific operations which are believed to be helpful in the design sequence. Such operations might include matrixes, flow charts or brainstorming. These are, however, tools which one may employ but which are neither essential nor in any way an analysis of the design process itself. Design theory is also totally unrelated to design appreciation, a horrendous topic prone to a host of pitfalls and in any case unlikely to be discussed in a meaningful way.

The test for a design theory in architecture – or for that matter in any other design discipline – would be that it offers a descriptive explanation of the way the design process operates.