Building Identities: Character in Architecture and Beyond (Zurich, 2-4 Sep 26)

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Deadline: Mar 1, 2026

Dominik Müller

The term ‘character’ is part of today’s vocabulary of architecture: we casually refer to the ‘character’ of specific buildings or landscapes, and the ‘characteristics’ of projects or historical city centres, to emphasize their uniqueness, or the qualities attributed to them. We seem to resort to the term whenever more figurative terms fail to describe a certain formal or material je-ne-sais-quoi, which may also be associated with a distinct atmosphere or ethos. ‘Character’ often allows us to personify a building – to apply human empathy to inanimate matter.

‘Character’ emerged as a critical concept in the eighteenth century and developed into a key notion within architectural discourse of that period. It became ubiquitous in public debates concerning buildings, cities and landscapes between 1750 and 1850. Writers on architecture employed this notion to indicate how a building expressed the personality of its patron, its architect, a style or genre, how its form related to its use, or how it represented a culture or a nation; in short, a building’s character was synonymous with its identity. Borrowing from literary theory, architects such as Germain Boffrand, Jacques-François Blondel, William Chambers, Étienne-Louis Boullée and Quatremère de Quincy elaborated on the notion of character in their writings. They used the term to articulate principles that ensured buildings properly express their function, or would be read and experienced appropriately by their audiences.

‘Character’ became especially versatile when the discovery of non-classical architectures rendered the Vitruvian orders insufficient to describe the different building cultures of the world, and when the stylistic repertoire of Western architecture broadened in all directions to include the gothic, the rural vernacular and various forms of non-European architecture. With questions of meaning and appropriateness becoming increasingly urgent, writers turned to the term ‘character’ when discussing landscapes, cities, buildings and interiors in architectural theory, philosophy, travel literature as well as literary fiction. Furthermore, as discussions regarding architectural proportions shifted from ideal systems and norms to the emotional effects of proportional modulation, ‘character’ came to encapsulate the affective dimensions of architecture and landscape. Our project Building Identity: Character in Architectural Debate and Design,1750-1850 explores how such discussions were related to broader uses of the term ‘character’, rooted in its origins outside the discipline of architecture. A convenient vehicle for various metaphors and metonymies, ‘character’ often signifies both the means and instruments of classification and their intended effect.

While scholars usually studied the uses of the concept focusing on Western-Europe and on designers and architectural critics (Szambien, Forty, Grignon and Maxim), our conference ‘Build-

ing Identities' is interested in examining character in a broader manner, across various disciplines and geographies. We aim to investigate the complexity, variety and contradictions surrounding its centrality in discourse. By foregrounding aspects that have long been undervalued, the conference 'Building Identities' invites participants to collaborate in writing a critical history of 'character' tracing:
- How 'character' connects and relates to different fields (art history, landscape, urban history, travel, literature, the performing arts, philosophy, religion, cultural history, anthropology, nascent natural sciences);
- What 'character' presupposes in terms of ideologies, also in connection to notions such as identity, custom, mœurs, civilisation, etc.
- How and why 'character' operates in specific contexts (classification, subordination, naturalisation).

We invite proposals that:
- Examine the notion of 'character' and its intellectual history in a variety of sources, within a diversity of disciplines and geographies;
- Question texts or practices that rely on 'character' in relation to architecture, landscape, and territory.
- Explore descriptions of the built environment that rely on 'character' to bridge the specific with the universal.
- Interrogate the notion in artistic practices, in building, urban and landscape designs.
- Exemplify the problems, paradoxes, flaws and possibilities of the notion.

We are interested in paper proposals treating and complicating 'character' as a historical concept, addressing specific uses of the term 'character' in sources from the period 1700-1900. Papers are welcomed that venture beyond the canonical sources of architectural theory, and engage with one or more of the following topics:

- The gender of architecture (buildings and interiors), cities and landscapes: usages of 'character' to gender the built environment, its relation to patrons, clients, and the public.

- The emotions of architecture, cities and landscapes: authors for whom 'character' served as a synonym for empathy, affect, or the emotional impact on the human mind and soul.

- The cultural or national identity of architecture, cities and landscapes: texts in which the term 'character' is employed to articulate cultural specificity and difference, or to construct ideas such as race, ethnicity and nation.

We particularly welcome papers that examine how the term migrated between different fields, semiotics and epistemes, as well as how it was translated from one language to another.

Abstracts of max. 300 words should be submitted to buildingidentities@gmail.com by 1 March 2026, along with the applicant's name, email address, professional affiliation, address, telephone number and a short curriculum vitae (maximum one page). Please combine both abstract and cv in one pdf file. Selected speakers will be notified by April.

The conference is part of the project Building Identity: Character in Architectural Debate and

Design, 1750-1850, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, and based at the Chair for the History and Theory of Architecture, gta Institute, ETH Zurich.

Conference organisers: Sigrid de Jong, Maarten Delbeke, Nikos Magouliotis, Dominik Müller

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