With the new architecture still in constant evolution, and its forms fragmented, bent, twisted and folded out of any immediately recognizable shape, a comparison with older, more canonical architecture also helps us to see the new, and to understand what we are seeing.

The aim of *The Architecture of the New Baroque* is to investigate the proposed claims regarding similarities between historical Baroque architecture of the 1600s (and its revival in the 1800s) to works of contemporary architecture which has been named “the new Baroque” (also known as the architecture of complexity or the architecture of the Fold). As author Michael Ostwald says early on, “Because the historic Baroque has been subjected to extensive historical scholarship it is used to provide a stable foundation for the remainder of the research” (p. 22). Comparing the new to the old is helpful because by revealing what the new is not, we are a step closer to understanding what it is. This kind of comparison works like a translation, allowing the reader (and the spectator) to grasp the meaning while appreciating the particular flavor or color of the original. What Ostwald does is examine the fidelity of the translations to discover if the touted similarities are superficial or profound (and thus if written theory is outstripping built projects). Along the way he examines not only architecture but the theoretical underpinnings, so that this small essay is unexpectedly rich. It allows those who have not followed the step-by-step unfolding of the movement to see it as a whole cloth (freezing it, of course, somewhat artificially at the point when the book was written, although the architecture itself continues to evolve). These days the rapidity and spread of theory means that its effect on design practice is almost immediate, much more so than when Guarino Guarini had a career of building experience behind him before writing his treatise on architecture.

The first step in Ostwald’s study is a review of “historical Baroque.” To accomplish this, the chapter is divided into several sections. The first describes the etymology of the term “Baroque”. The second deals with the timeframe of the style. The third places the style in its cultural context. The final section examines the architectural theory.

The next chapter, “The Old and the New”, begins correlating the key concepts of the twentieth century with those of the seventeenth. Historically, the dual cultural ideals of
openness and systemization were expressed concretely through the architectural concepts of infinity and movement. Ostwald identifies four strategies used to evoke infinity: curvature and perspectival devices of the wall, changing proportional and formal relationships, blurring of boundaries, and naturalistic forms and decoration. The next four sections consider these in turn.

This is the heart of the argument: the questions of if and how the old and the new Baroque movements are related will be answered here. This brief description of how the argument develops already gives an idea of the care with which these problems have been addressed.

Ostwald makes it clear that comparisons between historic and new Baroque works take into consideration not only visual similarities but those of technique and intent as well. This reviewer appreciated hearing that, because while I found very little in the way of visual similarities, I believe the comparisons of technique and intent are convincing.

Even the descriptions of historic Baroque characteristics are often dependent on their contrast with those of the Renaissance: like the new Baroque, the old Baroque is best described by what it is not.

Ostwald’s conclusions are guarded: if any artificial label can be justified, then that of New Baroque is justified, but in the final analysis the label itself is only relatively useful as a tool for analysis, criticism and study. Along the way, however, he does show us enough of the New Baroque to bring it into focus, which is in itself a good result. He cannot help but inject some criticisms along the way: Gehry’s Experience Music Project in Seattle “veers dangerously close to cacophony, rather than melody” (p. 81); “Late Twentieth Century examples of scenographic architecture are relatively common but few are as carefully proportioned or controlled as the historic Baroque examples” (p. 77); “Gehry’s illusion [in the Bilbao Guggenheim], unlike Bernini’s [Scala Regia], is less seductive and more likely to evoke amusement ... than it is to suggest infinite movement” (p. 72).

But these criticisms of the architecture are not limited to the new, so critical balance is maintained. Historic Baroque also has its flaws: excessive emphasis on detail could prevent perception of a coherent whole; contemporaneous use of several of the strategies for achieving the desired aims could simply overwhelm rather than involve the spectator.

Ostwald also makes it clear that in spite of some arguable similarities, the rules of the game have simply changed. The palette of materials is much more varied today, for one thing. For another, today’s design tool of choice – the computer – has altered virtually everything non-material: from the thought process of the designer, to visualization during design, to structure, to assembly.

This brings us to the final part of the book, which is a reflection on the implications of the New Baroque for architectural practice. Ostwald has addressed the implications and ethics of the use of computer-aided design at two Nexus conferences [Ostwald 2006, 2008]. His thoughtful consideration of the issue involved are a happy medium between unquestioning acceptance and reactive rejection.

The postscript of the book examines anthropomorphism and surface. The example illustrated, the 2001 Online Training Centre for Victoria University in Melbourne, reminded this reviewer of the facade explorations of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in the 1970s (like the Best Products building in Oxford Valley, Pennsylvania). Is this superficial play, or serious architecture? We’ll need a few more years to know. But