Etienne-Louis Boullée was one of the principal theorists of architectural character, an idea first hotly debated in late eighteenth century France, which was quickly adopted into preservation to describe the aesthetic principles structuring the relation between the parts and the whole of a preserved building or ensemble. Boullée conceived of character as the emotional response produced by the perception of a building, an idea shared by some of his contemporaries such as Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières (1721-93), another great theorist of character, who believed the proportions of architecture to be analogous with human sensations. Boullée tried to categorize the types of emotions that buildings could elicit, a radical idea for which there was no clear methodological model. The character of emotional responses, he thought, revealed itself more clearly in our experience of nature not buildings. He therefore described typical responses (even though they were mainly his own) to natural phenomena and then proposed ways to express them architecturally. He couched architectural character in terms of design intention, that is the architect’s ability to “execute well” nature’s lessons, in contrast to some of his contemporaries, such as François Blondel, who viewed character as fidelity to stylistic conventions. Architecture, Essai sur l’Art (written in 1796-97, but published only in 1953), illustrated with of his public projects, expanded his idea of character into what he called an architecture parlante, or speaking architecture, a neoclassical style that would express the building’s function and incite specific emotional responses in viewers. Boullée was born in Paris in 1728, the son of an architect who persuaded him to redirect his studies from painting to architecture. He studied under Jacques-Francois Blondel and Jean-Laurent Legeay, exponents of neoclassicism. He initially focused on designing residences, but became Controller of Buildings at the Hôtel des Invalides in 1778 and at the Ecole Militaire in 1780. As Professor at the 'École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées (1778-88) his theories exerted significant influence among his contemporaries, and he formed a new generation of important architects including Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand. Boullée died in 1799 in Paris.

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