

Book Reviews

Eating Architecture

JAMIE HOROWITZ and PAULETTE SINGLEY, editors

MIT Press, 2004

380 pages, illustrated

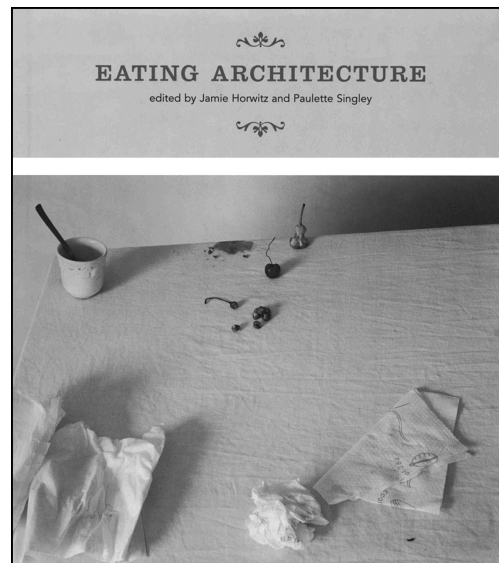
\$39.95 (cloth)

Almost twenty years ago, this magazine published an article by Marco Frascari entitled “*Semiotica Ab Edendo: Taste in Architecture*,” which opened with an indictment—“contemporary architecture is almost entirely tasteless”—and proceeded to argue the point by highlighting moments of intersection between architecture and gastronomy, cooking and designing, eating and living, art and cuisine.¹ The postmodern project, Frascari contended, was “grounded in the generation of a new ‘morality’ for architecture” and therefore still indebted to modernist orthodoxies—including the privilege of the visual order over all the other senses. Frascari encouraged architects to revive their neglected taste buds by embracing what he called “tactility,” a property found in the design of eighteenth-century pastries, in the culinary roots of “the concept of taste,” and, more generally, in the dining room (crowned “the phenomenological origin of architecture”). If Frascari’s critique of postmodernism has by now been internalized, his unconventional field of research has not, and this short article long stood as the lone reference on food and architecture. No longer. Frascari’s essay has now been republished as the centerpiece of a new collection edited by Jamie Horowitz and Paulette Singley, who have recruited architects, historians, theorists, and artists to garnish, slice, and otherwise reprocess every one of Frascari’s initial insights—and then add some more. The result is delectable indeed: a handsomely designed collection that has all the user-friendliness of a cookbook, none of the pretentiousness of a design monograph, and a good deal less self-importance than most collections of scholarly texts.

The book suffers from some of the pitfalls of the postsemiotic-interdisciplinarity genre. Most notably,

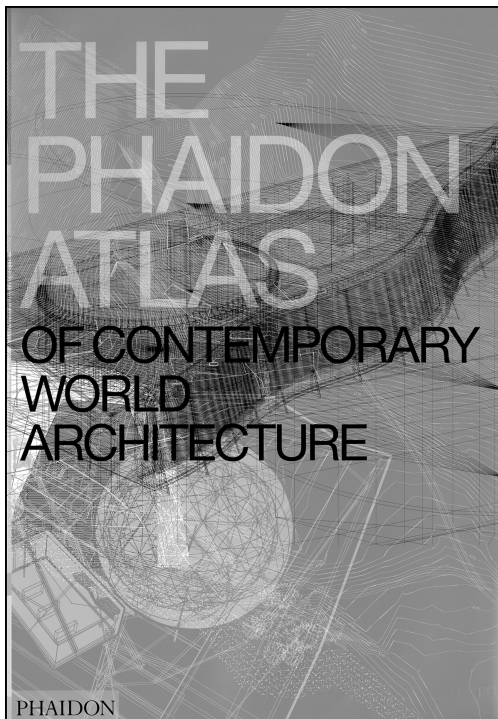
every contributor starts the argument anew, each arriving at the basic premise already articulated in the editors’ introduction: the “inherent spatiality of all that goes into the preparation and consumption of meals” and the “desiring mechanism of architecture within the realm of appetite” (p. 15). What saves this collection from becoming a cliché of cross-disciplinary fervor, however, is that there is little doubt that architecture and cuisine are *not* the same (although much is made of the similarity between buildings and layered cakes). What matters is not that buildings are like food, but rather that gastronomy and architecture have parallel histories. Accordingly, the editors offer the collection as an exercise in parallelism—food for thought, as it were, for bon vivant architects everywhere.

Do not be fooled by the editors’ light-hearted tone; a hefty theoretical agenda underlies their project. Under the seemingly innocent guise of serving up a few good stories, this collection manages to challenge, successively: the clean-cut image of Kantian aesthetics, the hegemonic rationality of occularcentrism, the repression of all things messy into the category of decay, the expectation that cultivation alone creates a sense of place, the containment of consumerism solely within images, even the validity of calorimetrics as an accurate gage of health. It is no less than the definition of architecture as a disciplinary body of knowledge that is at stake here. Theorists have long tried to reclaim the architectonic language of Western metaphysics (think Kant, Heidegger, Derrida) in the hope of demonstrating that architecture is, primarily, about thinking. This book offers one of the most original counterproposals to date: first of all, that *food* is to *feeling* what *architecture* is to *thinking*—its original metaphor, the trope that gave all theories of sensation their figures of speech. As Rodolfe El-Khoury expertly reminds us, “the aesthetic discourse of the Enlightenment repeatedly appealed to the mouth to demonstrate the immediacy and perspicacity of aesthetic apprehension” (p. 303). And secondly, that by extricating the “faculty of taste” from the



aesthetic idealism that has been spun around it, one might reveal that architectural cognition is based on sensation (feeling) as much as on intellection (thinking). In Paulette Singley’s elegant prose, “the art of eating introduces a critical form of contamination into those Kantian aesthetics that prohibit the eating of art” (p. 341). This collection is an effort to provoke just such a contamination.

Not all the authors, however, are equally convincing in this effort. Some fixate on the perishable quality of food to legitimate a neoromantic aesthetics of decay. Others laboriously extract a theory of everyday life from the elevation of the dinner table into an architectural typology. Still others ground an ontological conception of belonging in a rather nostalgic understanding of cultivation. Perhaps most dangerous is the analogy between designing and cooking, which relies on a portrait of the architect as an experimenter, inventor, and lone genius—as if design, in this day and age, was an unmediated projection of personal desire onto raw material. The theory of experience that emerges from the fixation with architectural “consumption” is no less



has and the have-nots of contemporary architectural practice. The *Atlas* also confirms some of the strains of twentieth-century architecture suggested in the *Encyclopedia*: a building deemed notable in Asia is more likely to have been designed by Renzo Piano (put your favorite western architect here) than by a local architect, and in the rare instance where a local architect is involved he/she is likely to have been educated in North America or Europe. This is not a criticism of the *Atlas* per se, but an indication that reference texts are not in and of themselves neutral; they take on the themes, currents, and perspectives of their time and place.

The most precocious students of architecture, to their credit, will look beyond facile claims and forms of authority to navigate their own educational priorities. The fragmentary, nonhierarchical,

global, and networked world in which we both theorize and practice architecture is just one result of modernity's effect on Enlightenment beliefs. Yet, there is something extremely interesting about these volumes taken together: they are all books. This may be surprising at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and indeed several of them could easily exist on CD or the Web. Nonetheless, all are clearly the result of a form of thinking that depends on the page and will ultimately find their way to bookshelves. What could be better news for architects: even when the material can be replaced by the virtual, sometimes we prefer a physical presence. However, if you lack bookshelf space and desire the comfort of Diderot see: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/encyc/>; if you need some updating on the "Theory of Architecture" see the Encyclopedia Britannica online at <http://www.eb.com> (but you will need a password to start your search).

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Ideas That Shaped Buildings

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The MIT Press, 2003
356 pages, illustrated
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Books dealing comprehensively with theory are a distinctive feature of the panorama of architectural literature, materializing periodically on bookstore shelves and ending up—one would assume—on practitioners' desks. Despite this burgeoning of publications, however, the definition of "architectural theory" remains by and large elusive, ensnared between a plurality of interpretations and a vague concurrence about its fundamental nature. *Ideas That Shaped Buildings* by Fil Hearn attempts to delineate a history of this subject. In a relatively concise volume,

presumably geared to a large audience, it traces a summa of several centuries of intellectual speculation about the aims and ends of architecture.

Ideas That Shaped Buildings is structured in four parts. The first is an introductory discussion of what Hearn calls "underpinnings" to theory, factors such as the social role of practitioners, their education, or the relationship with their professional and cultural history. What follows is a partially chronological narrative divided into three main categories: "Conventions," "Principles," and "Convolutions." The examples selected by the author range from Vitruvius to the writings of William J. Mitchell.

One might approach this book expecting to come across lengthy digressions on the basic concept of architectural theory, but *Ideas That Shaped Buildings* surprises the reader. A mere four pages at the very beginning provide introductory explanations. Hearn chooses a low-key approach, one that is well exemplified by the straightforward definition in the Preface: "A theory of architecture resides in any notion of what a building ought to be like" (p. xi). In this respect, the title of the volume is clear: "ideas" defined the architectural discourse over the centuries, not "theory."

At first the book boosts the reader's curiosity. But soon some perplexities over the contents emerge. For instance, the coverage of the sociohistorical factors at the roots of theory—the underpinnings—is not substantiated by references to the studies on the historical profile of the architectural profession available today. More importantly, the basic principles of the book are not completely convincing. Hearn rejects a strict definition of theory, but then he explicitly identifies theory with the act of writing on architecture. He implicitly states that theory comes through writing, but then he includes in the discussion authors who wrote little if anything, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. He addresses his attention to writings that enjoyed "wide and lasting influence," but then he does not explain how this influence is measured.

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IDEAS THAT SHAPED BUILDINGS



At times, *Ideas That Shaped Buildings* seems unable to seize the opportunity to better develop some of the ideas implied in its own narrative. This is the case when Hearn states that theory is any notion defining how a building should be. The possible corollary to such a statement is that behind any building there is a precise intent. That being said, the intentionality of architecture is a subject that deserves more consideration. It would lead to the consideration of subjects still in need of deeper discussion, such as the concepts of “anonymous architecture” and “architecture without architects” or to how authoritative positions develop through schools rather than writing.

Moreover, the selected examples raise more than a few questions. For example, one wonders why

the chapter titled “Design of Cities” jumps from Laugier to Camillo Sitte, totally ignoring Ildefonso Cerdá’s *Teoría General de la Urbanización*, a book that not only was explicitly meant to theorize how to “shape” cities but that was also influential on practice; or why the part on “Theory since 1965” does not include Also Rossi’s *The Architecture of the City*. Hearn admits that the “theorists” included in the book “represent a personal selection from the array of established texts and themes that might be treated” (p. xiv). But the ensemble of names and book titles contained in *Ideas That Shaped Buildings* seems more to reflect the author’s sympathies and idiosyncrasies than to define a coherent line of reasoning.

Succinctness and a genuine effort to produce a synthetic work are the remarkable traits of this text. Yet, concision can lead to simplification and trivialization. Nevertheless, *Ideas That Shaped Buildings* has one important merit: it gets to the heart of the question of what architectural theory is and what it is for. These are not pointless interrogations. On the contrary, they have implications for the way we consider architecture and the way we teach it. More than this, the book elicits one important interrogative: do the recurring attempts to define a body of theory reflect the intrinsic frailty and, at the same time, richness of a culture that is in between different disciplines? A thoughtful discussion about architecture and the ideas behind it could perhaps start from here.

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refabricating ARCHITECTURE: How Manufacturing Methodologies Are Poised to Transform Building Construction

STEPHEN KIERAN and JAMES TIMBERLAKE

McGraw-Hill, 2004
175 pages, illustrated
\$19.95 (paper)

The central aim of *refabricating ARCHITECTURE* is to challenge architects to rethink the status quo of the roles, processes, and interrelationships of the entire building industry not only to address material and energy inefficiencies but also to posit new opportunities of leadership for architects. To accomplish this, the authors suggest that alternative models for restructuring already exist in the automotive, airline, and shipbuilding industries. Even within the present-day vernacular off-site building industry, effective cost-saving techniques, such as using new systems of automation, could be appropriated: “The only thing lacking is the vision and the will to use it” (p. 113).

In fact, these industrial manufacturers have developed new methods and processes to successfully address consumer demand for products that are made faster, cheaper, and of better quality while costing less. These results are largely accomplished through grouping numerous parts (for a car there are more than four thousand) into more manageable “blocks, chunks, or modules” by a supplier that works with the original equipment manufacturer at the earliest stages of the design and fabrication processes. This results in quicker final assemblies and tighter quality control, as now the suppliers hold primary responsibility for each module. This shift to “more for less” results in a hybrid between mass production and customization called *mass customization*.

The authors advocate the repositioning of the architect to act as the central administrator of collective information technologies within a reconfigured building industry. They state: “Architects will serve as the overseers of the exchange of information. They will orchestrate the interactions and prompt the disciplines to work together. This role is not the advocacy of the architect as master builder, but rather as a twenty-first century maestro” (p. 22) and “This new master builder transforms the singular mind glorified in schools and media to a new genius of collective intelligence” (p. xii).