

Reviewed by Anthony Vidler

Rethinking Architecture

A Reader in Cultural Theory

edited by Neil Leach

London: Routledge, 1997

The Anaesthetics of Architecture

by Neil Leach

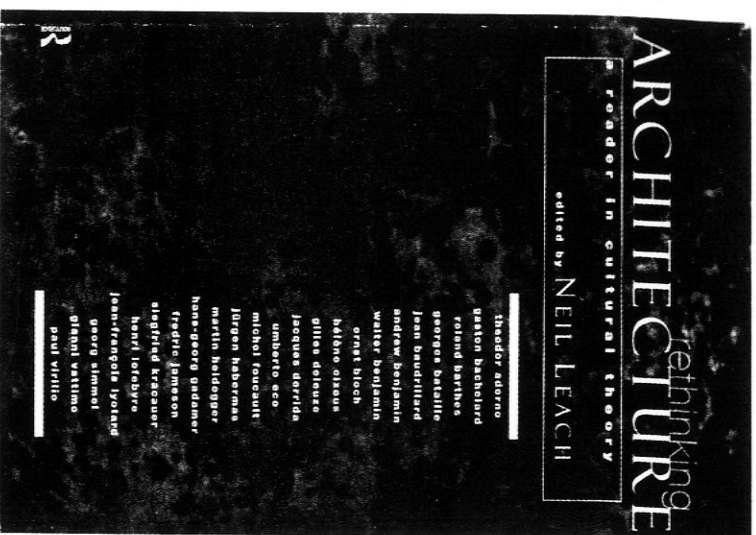
Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999

Book Review

SHIFTS IN THE WAYS in which architectural thought is produced and reproduced, from the Renaissance treatise to the avant-garde manifesto, comprise an interesting but little-studied aspect of the history of theory. And the past generation has witnessed an intriguing shift: whereas once, from Alberti to Le Corbusier, architectural theory consisted largely of writings written by and for architects, postmodern architectural theorizing more often than not takes the form of essays written by critics or specialists from another discipline. One result of this change has been the increasing isolation of that activity usually called "theory" from the profession as a whole. It is thus not surprising that in recent years the anthology has become the vehicle of preference for those who wish to influence theory. Retrospective and inevitably academic, this literary genre risks nothing new; its theoretical ambition is limited to the summary and the backward look. *Rethinking Architecture*, the new anthology edited by Neil Leach, is one such retrospective collection.

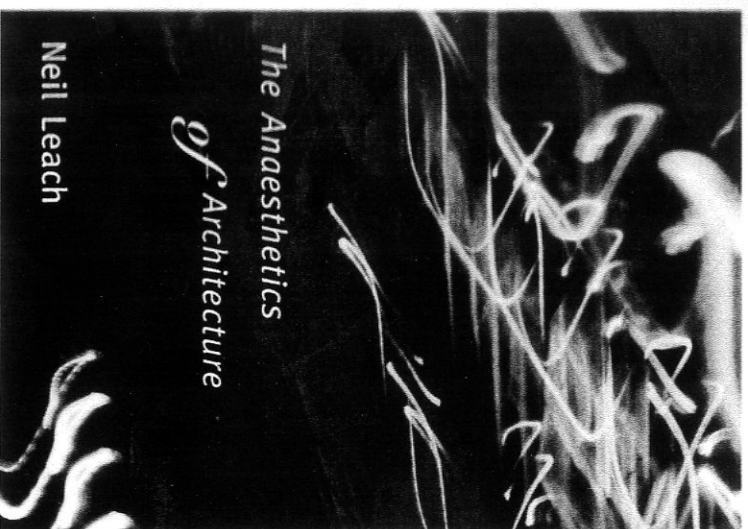
Composed of texts by writers from outside the discipline of architecture, it nicely complements two other excellent anthologies of more specifically architectural writings, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, edited by Joan Ockman with Edward Eigen, and *Architectural Theory Since 1968*, edited by K. Michael Hays.

Some thirty years ago, what was taught in schools under the rubric "theory" consisted mainly of the writings of architects or of architectural historians and critics. Thus, at Cambridge University in the early 1960s, the reading lists of courses taught by Colin Rowe, Leslie Martin, and Colin St. John Wilson started with Vitruvius, continued through Alberti and Palladio (with Rudolf Wittkower's *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* as a necessary supplement), moved on to Laugier and Schinkel, then jumped to the 20th-century avant-gardes—Futurism, Neo-Plasticism, Expressionism—before finishing with a good dose of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, accompanied by Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner, and Reyner Banham. Contemporary theory was supplied by John Summerson, Alison and Peter Smithson, Colin Rowe on Le Corbusier and Karl Popper, Colin St. John Wilson on Alvar Aalto and Adrian Stokes, and



Leslie Martin on Pevsner, Naum Gabo, and the "Circle" group. When, some years later, theory courses were introduced at Princeton, this repertoire was extended to include the Constructivists (courtesy of Kenneth Frampton), the French Enlightenment duo of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne-Louis Boullée, and, a bit later, Adolf Loos and Aldo Rossi. The anthology of record was then Ulrich Conrads's *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, first published in English in 1970. The last entry in this collection, "We demand," from the Stuttgart "heimat" group (1963), seemed at the time open-ended and prospective, anticipating the insurgent tones of the latter 1960s. This response was reinforced by the "French effect" that had drifted first across the Channel and then the Atlantic in the wake of events and publications occurring from 1959 to 1968 and centering around the activities of Guy Debord and the Situationists, which opened up the possibilities of a debate on architecture fueled not by internal but by external (political) questions.

It was Christian Norberg-Schulz's *Intentions in Architecture*, published in 1963 and quickly welcomed at Cambridge as a kind of "liberal scientific" synthesis, which introduced a homogenizing force that self-consciously joined traditional architectural aesthetics and ideologies to a (somewhat) systematic survey of extra-architectural interpretation. By working to academicize an activity that could now justifiably term itself "theory," work such as Norberg-Schulz's helped establish a separation between the historical study of architecture and the theoretical foundations of criticism and design. The appearance of English translations of the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault further intensified this trajectory. Architectural issues outside the discipline, from meaning to power, were central to the theoretical debates of the time; and with the



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1972 publication, in *AA Files*, of Robin Evans's first study of Benjamin's Panopticon, architectural theory increasingly took on an extra-architectural dimension. The first translation of Walter Benjamin's "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Perspecta 12*, introduced another form of critical history to the study of architecture in the metropolis, a type of critical history, exemplified by Manfredo Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia*, that relied strongly on Massimo Cacciari's studies of the Frankfurt School. In the late '70s and early '80s, Carl Schorske's interdisciplinary studies of Viennese fin-de-siècle culture, David Frisby's recuperation of sociological thought from Georg Simmel to Siegfried Kracauer, and the writings of Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu on the dissemination and consumption of the image (academically confirming, in a sense, the insights of Debord) all worked to construct a discursive framework for the critical interpretation of architecture very different from that of the previous decades. Fredric Jameson's seminal article of 1984, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," set off a debate over the ideological interpretation of contemporary design that has been continued passionately by Mike Davis, Victor Burgin, and Edward Soja, among others. In the United States and Great Britain especially, these debates have produced, within the discipline of architecture, a growing interest in the new field of "cultural studies," and it is in this context that Leach firmly situates *Rethinking Architecture*.

Neil Leach has selected a useful and generally admirable group of texts written by philosophers and cultural critics over the last century, from the well-known "Metropolis and Mental Life," written by the sociologist Georg Simmel in 1903, to more recent studies of the cultural condition of architecture by Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Gianni Vattimo, and Fredric Jameson. The writings of critical theorists such

as Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Jürgen Habermas are represented, as are the works of those who comprise the phenomenological and hermeneutic school now respected so much at Cambridge due to the influence of Dalibor Veselý—Martin Heidegger, Gaston Bachelard, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Also included are the semiologists Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, and the post-structuralists Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. For these reasons alone, the anthology is already widely used in theory classes, and no doubt this will continue to be so.¹

Given the very brief introduction of the editor, and the even briefer identifying notes, it is difficult to draw out any implied agenda from this anthology; and indeed, its very usefulness stems from this openness, which encourages readers to come to their own conclusions. Leach himself characterizes the book as a collection of "outsider" texts—texts that both transgress the boundaries of traditional architectural theory and stimulate reflection on such boundaries. Playing upon deconstructivist terms, Leach even suggests that "it is a project that builds upon its own erasure," and also that "once it has been shown that architecture could be otherwise," the anthology "will have canceled itself out." "Architecture," he concludes, "will have been rethought" (xx).

Leach seems to have avoided the inclusion of any theorists, from outside or inside, who interpret architectural form-making as a process of cultural and social invention, and also to have excluded any text that might be understood as prescriptive rather than as analytic. This leads inevitably to a certain sense of dematerialization, of abstraction and non-specificity, in the "architecture" discussed here.

Such a position, however, raises crucial questions for the "rethinking" suggested by the title. On the one hand, given the evidence of the selected texts, such rethinking must have been in continuous session throughout the century, and this in specific historical and cultural contexts—in fin-de-siècle Vienna and Berlin, in Weimar Germany, and in postwar Europe and America, among other contexts. In such contexts, each of these texts possessed specific architectural and cultural resonances, often not so much in opposition to the architectural establishment or avant-garde, or even with direct reference to architecture itself, but more with respect to larger social and political arguments for which architecture, with its constructive and social overtones, served as a handy metaphor.

But now, far removed from these contexts, can we read these writings as "about architecture" at all, and especially about the theorization of contemporary architecture? At the very least, each of these essays has to be imaginatively recast by the reader in order to bear upon present conditions of production and consumption, professional habits and patronage, political

and social movements, and cultural styles and tastes. Further, while the "reflection" which Leach urges us to undertake might reveal

aspects of the architectural that impinge upon the social or cultural and might thus lead to a rethinking of architecture in society, discursive thought outside architecture offers little guidance as to how the formal and technological conditions of architecture itself might change. Indeed, Leach seems to have avoided the inclusion of any theorists, from outside or inside, who interpret architectural form-making as a process of cultural and social invention, and also to have excluded any text that might be understood as prescriptive rather than as analytic. This leads inevitably to a certain sense of dematerialization, of abstraction and non-specificity, in the "architecture" discussed here; but this is hardly surprising, given that most of the authors are not concerned with architecture *per se*, but rather with architecture as a metaphorical structure for thinking about something else—humanity, society, publicity, inhabiting, and so on—or even about the act of analysis itself. If there is a personal bias in this collection, then, it is towards a general, non-specific view of architecture that engages the social and philosophical criticism of modernity, that finds reasons for the plight of culture in technology, consumerism, and mass deculturalization, and that looks sideways if not backwards to a vision

of some "lost" architecture once filled with meaning but now devalued beyond all hope.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the anthology is implied by what Leach calls the "note of reflection," the "moment of recuperation" (xiii) that he finds characteristic of our own fin de siècle. Certainly, as he notes, theorists of the postmodern, such as Jameson, have articulated a spirit of "inverted millenarianism" that looks to the past rather than to the future, that sees collapse and fragmentation rather than certitude and foundation. In this view, apparently shared by Leach, "it is as though the very foundations of contemporary culture have been undermined" (xiii). Read in this light, these once vital and polemical writings come to evoke a mood of quiet pessimism; they become testaments to philosophical responses to a world that Max Weber described, in 1919, as "disenchanted." Whether couched in the terms of negative dialectics, phenomenological hermeneutics, analytical semiotics, or deconstruction, the perspectives on architecture offered here add up to a dispiritingly closed vista. It is thus symptomatic that this anthology omits significant efforts to reinterpret architecture in relation to

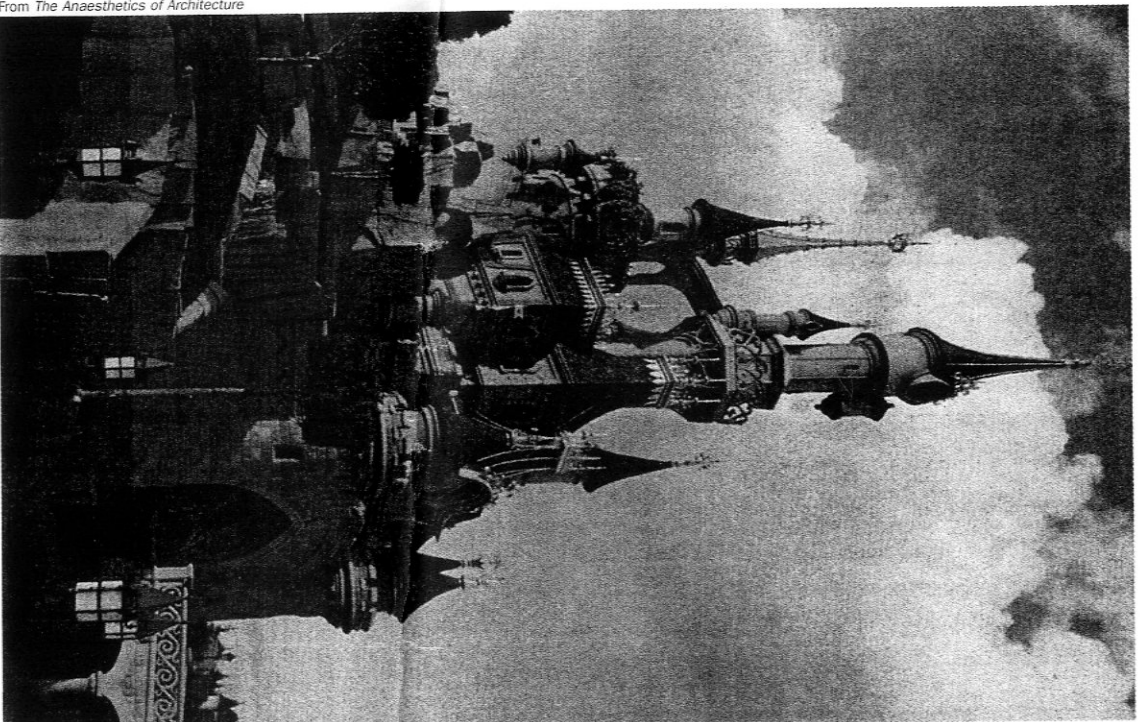
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psychoanalysis and vision, gender and ethnicity, the sexuality of space, and postcolonial views of culture, and yet any serious "rethinking" of architecture at the start of this century cannot be undertaken without upsetting the structure and emphases of the traditional profession, of traditional typologies, and of traditional modes of envisaging the architectural subject in the light of these urgent and hardly ephemeral investigations.

Clearly, Leach has a deliberate parti pris, and this is delivered, appropriately enough, in *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*. Produced in a similar format, and coinciding with the publication of the anthology, this lengthy essay is surely intended to be read as its absent and "polemical" introduction. Here Leach has written what he describes as a "manifesto," a clarion call for us to consider seriously the cumulative message of the anthology: that architecture, having been enslaved in turn by monumentality, consumerism, and the spectacle, has lost its vital essence, traded substance for appearance, depth for surface, aesthetic form for image; and further that the apotheosis of this degradation can be found in the ersatz environments of Las Vegas and Disney World and the artwork of advertising; and finally that it is to architecture itself that this fall might be traced.

Leach locates his architectural scapegoat for this cultural degradation in the seductive and illusory charms of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's 1972 *Learning from Las Vegas*. To this end Leach spins an engaging fable, building his case upon Simmel, Benjamin, the Situationists, Baudrillard, and Susan Buck-Morss, in such a way that it seems to flow naturally from the anthology and to present an irrefutable case for the prosecution, an unassailable demonstration of architecture's "death" at the hands of advertising culture. And yet, as in the anthology, history once more becomes a victim of ideology. For Leach, there seems to be no historical distance between Friedrich Nietzsche's affirmation

From *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*



EuroDisney.

study of this subject—we might want to pause and look more closely at the historical-theoretical conditions evinced by anthology and book.²

For if theory today is largely extra-architectural, how logically might we expect an architecture of any kind—oppositional, traditional, formalist, or *informe*—to emerge from such theory? It is, after all, in the nature of extra-disciplinary criticism to refute the apparently secure bases on which productions are said to stand, to undermine the overconfident authorizing discourses of artists and architects, to set objects in context, to explain and to frame them with reference to other circumstances

while extra-architectural critique has ever stimulated architects and the public to think in different ways about objects that aesthetically shelter, only discourse internal to architecture has ever been able to discover the means to represent and materialize this difference. Without discovering some way to join once more the internal discussion of the production of technology and form to the external critique of that production, the "rethinking" of architecture outside architecture will unfortunately only serve to widen the gap between theory and practice, a gap that will take more than retrospective reflection to overcome.

Notes

1. A few small caveats, however: the usefulness of this kind of anthology must also be measured in the editor's notes and bibliography. In an obvious attempt to make this a "student" rather than a "scholarly" edition, any extensive editorial apparatus has been suppressed, to the detriment of its usefulness to students, who would benefit from more information as to the historical context of the original text and who indeed might wish to engage in further study. It is frustrating, given that the texts are not arranged in chronological order, that the list of "Sources" does not contain original publication information; moreover, the "Selected Bibliography" lists only works by the authors selected for the

anthology, and again in their translated versions, without original dates and titles. There are no editor's footnotes, and the introductions to the selections are very brief, giving little real sense of the historical and cultural dynamic informing them, or of the intellectual relations, affiliations, and influences among the authors. Thus, for example, we are told that Simmel's "portrait of the modern individual" "matches" that of Walter Benjamin, and that his "evocation of the bridge" "makes a provocative comparison with that of Heidegger," with no indication of the scope of Benjamin's reading of Simmel, or of Heidegger's real philosophical differences with either thinker. For the uninitiated, such remarks give little sense of the complex aesthetic and political dynamics of 20th-century critical theory, of its chronology or internal oppositions.